book
THE EPIC AS IT WAS NEVER TOLD BEFORE
THE ARYAVARTA CHRONICLES BOOK 3
KURUKSHETRA
KRISHNA UDAYASANKAR

THE ARYAVARTA CHRONICLES

BOOK 3

K U R U K S H E T R A

Krishna Udayasankar

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Antha: The Resolution
Standing on the Shoulders of Giants
Acknowledgements

Author’s Note

Aryavarta, circa second millenium BCE

In a large glen somewhere in the verdant forests of Naimisha, a sattra, or conclave of scholars, has been convened by the sage Saunuka Kulapati. Here, in what is described as a sacrifice lasting twelve years, the finest scholar–seers of the land, the keepers of knowledge, have gathered to discuss the knowledge of their times and give final form to its codification as the Vedas, Books of Knowledge. At the centre of this conclave stands Ugrashravas Sauti, the bard, traditional keeper of the ancient narratives known as the Puranas. The story he tells them, however, is their own, the tale of who they are and how they have come to be there.

He calls it *Jaya*. Victory.

To the gathered scholars at Naimisha, that story was neither ancient nor mythological. It was itihasa, or history. *Jaya* was undeniably a tale of its time, and just as posterity elevated the great men of that time and saw them as gods, so too was the story’s context adapted and its reality turned into metaphor. In order to go behind the metaphor, and to tell the tale as mytho-history rather than mythology, the essential question that came to my mind was: If Govinda and all the other characters of this grand narrative had walked the world as we know it today, bound by our language and constructions, our common perceptions of physics, psychology and politics, what might their story really have been? Surprisingly, at its core it may not have been very different from the one that took form millennia ago during the conclave of Naimisha.

Like societies, stories are made up of two elements that I call (admittedly, with neither theological nor philosophical expertise) moral *imperative* and moral *principle*. Moral principles are the relatively immutable values that guide human life, perhaps even underlie philosophical evolution, whereas moral imperatives are the derivative rules that are part of social structure, the behavioural norms embedded in everyday interaction. These norms are often context-specific, and change as the structure of society changes. At the same time, for any social institution to survive, it must either adapt to these changing imperatives, or else justify defying them.

Through a process of re-interpretation and interpolation, even some aggrandization, the many unnamed narrators who have passed down such epic tales through the centuries have recast some events and explained others differently to make them not just palatable but also plausible and relevant to their audience. What remain constant, however, are the broad sweep of the story and the moral principles that underlie it.

There began the quest for the story that lay hidden beneath the larger epic tales of ancient India. The story that emerged as a result is the product of research and analysis based on both mainstream and alternative (e.g. Bhil and Indonesian Kakawain) narratives, the details of which are given at the back of this book.

Based on these works, ranging from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's and K.M. Munshi's interpretations in their books *Krishnacharitra* and *Krishnavatara* respectively, to Van Buiten's critical translations of the epic's texts and Alf Hiltebeitel's scholarly research papers and books on their symbolism-rich language, and to alternative Bhil and Indonesian Kakawain versions, to name a few sources, it becomes possible to construct a story of why things may have happened as they did, a plausible narrative with reasonable internal logical consistency. Something that could well have been history, something that stands firm not just on faith but also on logic and science. In short, the story of why something might have happened.

And so, Aryavarta comes to life not as a land of demigods and demons in strife, but as an empire of nobles, commoners and forest-dwellers in socio-economic conflict. Kalas, Yugas and the Wheel of Time make sense as theories of revolution and renewal, and the terrible Rakshasas of legend can be seen as Rikshasas – Vriksha or tree-people – their horned heads and fanged teeth morphed back into animal-horn helmets and tiger-tooth necklaces. The mythical epic of old, a story of gods and all-encompassing divine will in action, then falls into place as the tale of a feudal, agrarian hierarchy based on natural law and religion, caught in the throes of technological and economic change. In fact, the moment we do away with assumptions of both preternatural and supernatural forces, of omnipotence and divinity, we find ourselves necessarily seeking out political, social and even psychological explanations – including theories of conspiracy and political intrigue.

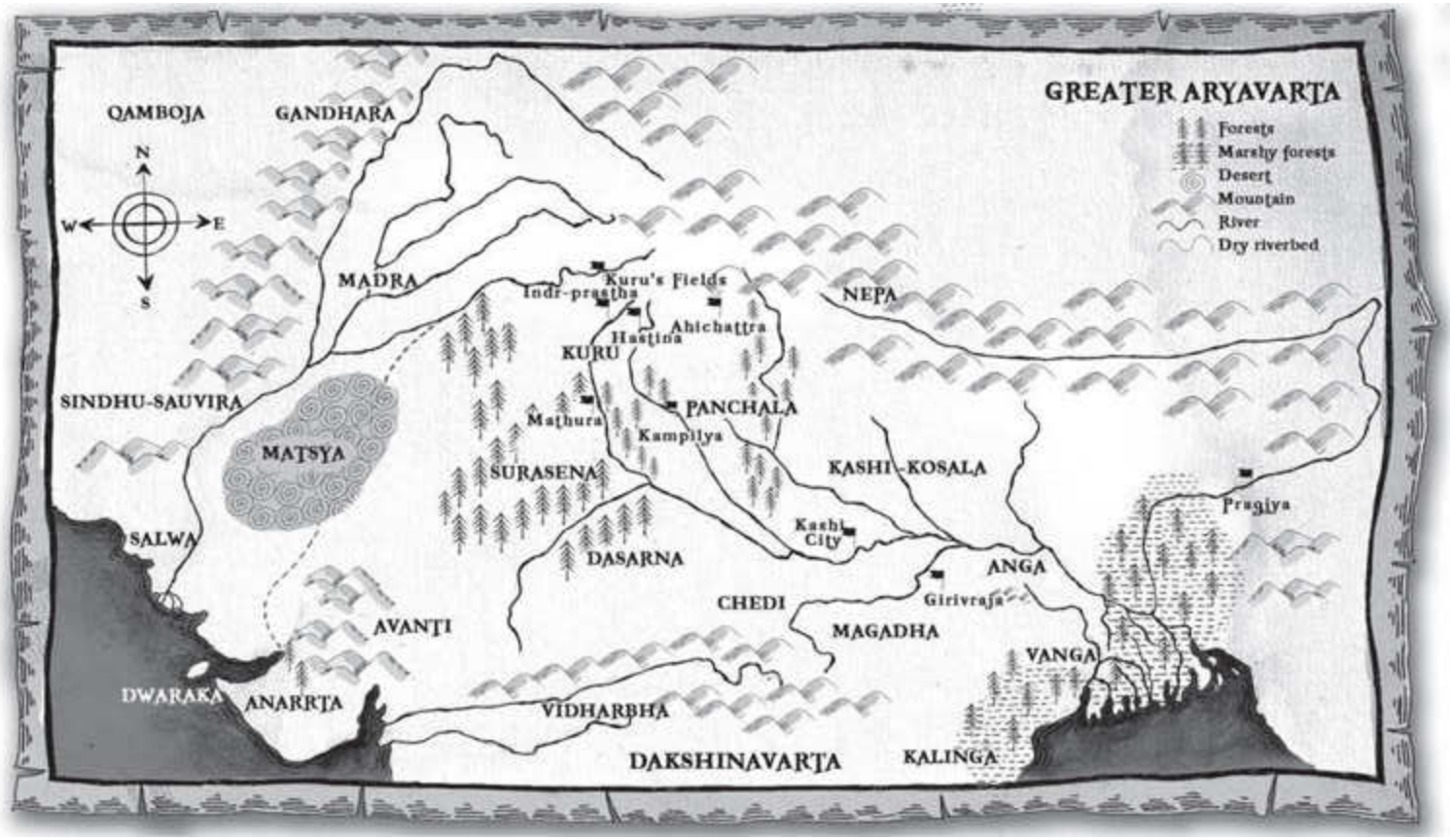
We are the stories we tell. *The Aryavarta Chronicles* are neither reinterpretation nor retelling. These stories are a construction of reality based on a completely different set of assumptions – a distinction that is important because constructing shared reality is what links individual to society, however widely we may define the latter. To that extent, it no longer matters whether these events happened or not, or whether they happened in a completely different way, because the idea that such things have come to pass has affected the lives of many for a very long time now. There is a sanctity which has developed as a result of what people have come to think and do as they have interacted with the spirit of these epic tales and their characters, with the world of Aryavarta. At the end of the day, that spirit is much, much larger than any story, or a book.

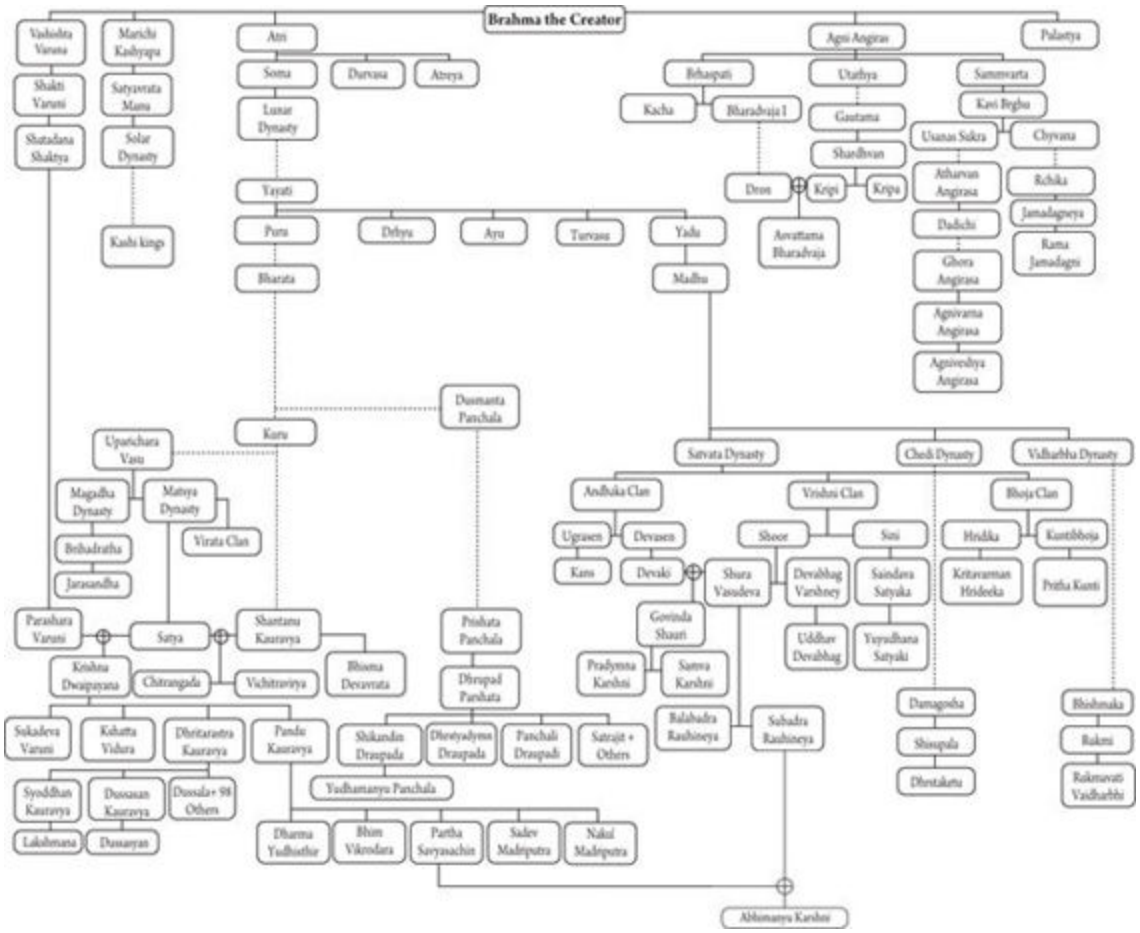
I am simply one of those innumerable bards who passes the story on, contexualized and rationalized but not lacking in sincerity or integrity. It is you, the reader, who shall infuse it with meaning and bring it to life as you will.

Reproduced from *The Aryavarta Chronicles Book 1: Govinda*.

narayanaya vid mahe
vaasudevaya dhi mahi
thanno vishnu prachodayaat

We shall know the divine spirit within
We shall meditate on the essence of all beings
Thus, the all-pervading shall blaze forth


GREATER ARYAVARTA
Forests
Marshy forests
Desert
Mountain
River
Dry riverbed
N
W
E
S
QAMBOJA
GANDHARA
MADRA
SINDHU-SAUVIRA
MATSYA
SALWA
AVANTI
DWARAKA
ANARRTA
VIDHARBHA
DAKSHINAVARTA
Indr-prastha
Kuru's Fields
Hastina
Ahichattra
KURU
NEPA
PANCHALA
Mathura
Kampilya
SURASENA
DASARNA
KASHI-KOSALA
Kashi City
Pragjya
ANGA
Girivraja
CHEDI
MAGADHA
VANGA
KALINGA


Brahma the Creator
Vashishta Varuna
Shakti Varuni
Shatadana Shaktya
Marichi Kashyapa
Satyavrata Manu
Solar Dynasty
Kashi kings
Atri
Soma
Lunar Dynasty
Durvasa
Atreya
Yayati
Puru
Bharata
Druhyu
Anu
Turvasu
Yadu
Madhu
Dushanta Panchala
Kuru
Uparichara Vasu
Magadha Dynasty
Brihadratha
Jarasandha
Matsya Dynasty
Virata Clan
Parashara Varuni
Satya
Krishna Dwaipayana
Chitrangada
Vichitravirya
Shantanu Kauravya
Bhisma Devavrata
Sukadeva Varuni
Kshatta Vidura
Dhritarastra Kauravya
Pandu Kauravya
Syoddhan Kauravya
Dussasan Kauravya
Lakshmana
Dussalya
Dussala+ 98 Others
Prishata Panchala
Dhrupad Parshata
Shikandin Draupada
Dhrstyadyumn Draupada
Panchali Draupadi
Satrajit + Others
Yudhamanyu Panchala
Dharma Yudhisthir
Bhim Vikrodara
Partha Savyasachin
Sadev Madriputra
Nakul Madriputra
Abhimanyu Karshni
Agni Angiras
Brhaspati
Kacha
Bharadvaja I
Utathya
Gautama
Shardhvan
Dron
Kripi
Kripa
Asvattama Bharadvaja
Samvarta
Kavi Brghu
Usanas Sukra
Chyvana
Atharvan Angirasa
Dadichi
Ghora Angirasa
Agnivarna Angirasa
Agnivedya Angirasa
Rchika
Jamadagneya
Rama Jamadagni
Palastya
Satvata Dynasty
Andhaka Clan
Ugrasen
Kans
Devasen
Devaki
Vrishni Clan
Shoor
Shura Vasudeva
Govinda Shauri
Pradymna Karshni
Samva Karshni
Balabadra Rauhineya
Subadra Rauhineya
Devabhag Varshney
Uddhav Devabhag
Sini
Saindava Satyaka
Yuyudhana Satyaki
Bhoja Clan
Hridka
Kritavarman Hrideeka
Kuntibhoja
Pritha Kunti
Chedi Dynasty
Damaghsa
Shisupala
Dhrstaketu
Vidharbhu Dynasty
Bhishmaka
Rukmi
Rukmavati Vaidharbhi

Cast of Characters

The Firewrights

The Secret Keeper: Head of the Firewright Order.

Ghora Angirasa: Former Secret Keeper of the Firewrights. Known for his revolutionary ideas and beliefs, many contrary to the traditions of the Firewright order.

Devala Asita: A Firewright faithful to the old traditions and beliefs of the Order. Known for his skill with hallucinogens and poisons, he is considered one of the most dangerous men in all Aryavarta.

The Firstborn

Krishna Dwaipayana: The greatest Vyasa – head – of the Firstborn Order that Aryavarta has ever seen, now retired. Also biological father to princes Pandu and Dhritarastra of the Kurus.

Sukadeva Vasishta Varuni: Legitimate son of Krishna Dwaipayana and heir to his spiritual legacy.

Markand: Current Vyasa of the Firstborn.

At Dwaraka

Govinda Shauri: Former Commander of the Armed Forces of Dwaraka. Earlier a prince of Surasena, along with his brother Balabadra he brought together the warring Yadu tribes to form a Federation of Yadu Nations at Dwaraka. Also rumoured to have been responsible for the fall of

Firewrights, despite having been Ghora Angirasa's student. For this reason, he is considered a traitor by many.

Balabadra Rauhineya: Govinda's older half-brother. Known for his fair and straightforward nature as well as his skill at wrestling and mace-fighting.

Yuyudhana Satyaki: Cousin to Govinda and Balabadra and former prince of the Vrishni clan.

Pradymna Karshni: The first of Govinda Shauri's adopted sons. Married to Rukmavati, princess of the Vidharbha kingdom.

Samva Karshni: The second of Govinda Shauri's adopted sons.

Daruka: One of the captains of Dwaraka's navy, and close associate of Govinda Shauri.

At Indr-prastha

Dharma Yudhisthir: Former Emperor of Aryavarta and son of Prince Pandu of the Kurus.

Bhim Vikrodara: Second son of Prince Pandu. Known for his strength and skill with arms.

Partha Savyasachin: Third son of Prince Pandu. Known as one of the best archers in all of Aryavarta. Married to Subadra Rauhineya of Dwaraka.

Nakul Madriputra: First of the twin sons of Prince Pandu by his second wife, Madri.

Sadev Madriputra: Second of the twin sons of Prince Pandu by his second wife, Madri.

Panchali Draupadi: Former Empress of Aryavarta and Princess of Panchala.

Ayodha Dhaumya: Royal Priest and Counsellor to Dharma Yudhisthir and his family.

Subadra Rauhineya: Sister to Govinda Shauri and Balabadra Rauhineya. Married to Partha Savyasachin.

Abhimanyu Karshni: Son of Partha and Subadra, and adopted heir to Dharma Yudhisthir.

At Hastina

Dhritarastra: King of Eastern Kuru. Biological son of Krishna Dwaipayana, he is blind since birth and so was forced to yield the throne to his younger brother, Pandu. Becomes king subsequent to Pandu's abdication.

Bhisma Devavrata: Patriarch of the Kuru family and once Regent of the kingdom. Respectfully referred to as the Grandsire and remains, despite his age, an undefeated warrior.

Syoddhan Kauravya: Eldest son of Dhritarastra and Crown Prince of Kuru.

Dussasan Kauravya: Third son of Dhritarastra and second in line to the Kuru throne.

Shakuni: Former prince of the Gandhara kingdom and Dhritarastra's brother-in-law. Came to live at Hastina after Bhisma Devavrata annexed his nation and brought his sister to Hastina as Dhritarastra's bride. Is especially fond of his nephew, Syoddhan.

Vidur: Half-brother to Dhritarastra and biological son of Krishna Dwaipayana by a slave-woman.

Sanjaya Gavalgani: Prime Minister of Kuru and counsellor to Syoddhan Kauravya. Was formerly a student of Krishna Dwaipayana and one of his closest confidantes.

Acharya Dron: Teacher and martial instructor to the Kaurava princes, and one of the senior advisors at King Dhritarastra's court.

Acharya Kripa: Dron's brother-in-law and fellow advisor at King Dhritarastra's court.

At Kampilya

Dhrupad Parshata: King of Southern Panchala.

Shikandin Draupada: Son of King Dhrupad and once Crown Prince of Panchala. Known for his skills in the wilderness and for his distinctive braided hair.

Dhrstyadymn Draupada: Adopted son of King Dhrupad. He and his sister Panchali were foundlings who have no recollection of their lives before their escape from a burning structure in the middle of Panchala's forests. Since his adoption, King Dhrupad has declared him the heir to the Panchala throne, superseding Shikandin.

At Upaplavya

Chief Virat: Chief of the desert nation of Matsya.

Uttara Vairati: Virat's daughter.

Others

Vasusena: King of Anga and faithful friend to Syoddhan Kauravya.

Jayadrath: King of Sindhu and Syoddhan's brother-in-law.

Asvattama Bharadvaja: Son of Acharya Dron and King of Northern Panchala. Brought up by his father as an incomparable warrior.

Part 1

1

THE SURROUNDINGS WERE, BY ANY RECKONING, UNPLEASANT. A windowless space made entirely of rough, hewn stone and lit by a solitary torch set in a metal ring on the wall. Blood and other dark fluids stained the floor in morbid patterns. A broken chain, its links rusted and jagged, hung from the ceiling. Its lower extent was crusted with something that a weak mind in a weak moment might mistake for torn scraps of flesh. The air smelt putrid, overwhelming the strains of oil-smoke that filled the dungeon. The three men who currently occupied its small confines were a strange match for their surroundings, and stranger still was their fellowship.

First was the courtier, the man in the lead as those of royal houses often were, be their blood true or, as was in his case, not quite so. Sanjaya Gavalgani was as fully aware of his ostensible lack of nobility as he was of his factual right to rule. The contradiction made him angry and ambitious, and, all the more determined to have as his own that which he believed had been wrongly denied him – the throne of the Kuru kingdom and, thus, the Imperial throne. For decades he had manipulated and plotted to pit his two rivals, his half-brothers though they knew it not, against each other, and he had been successful. Dharma Yudhisthir, once Emperor of Aryavarta, was now an exile, though he had recently declared his intention to reclaim his throne – an idea that was to Sanjaya as ridiculous as it was pitiful. As for his other rival… He smiled to himself at the thought. Syoddhan Kauravya, the untitled ruler of Aryavarta, had been a useful puppet thus far, but his time, too, was over. War, that mighty, dark demoness lurked on the horizon. She would soon lay Aryavarta at Sanjaya’s feet.

And yet, at this, the pinnacle of his success, the ultimate step before his web of intrigue brought all Aryavarta under his sway, Sanjaya was aware that he was not omnipotent. His rise, his plans, had depended greatly on the might of the second man in the present company. Devala Asita, the bald, menacing Firewright, his soldier, inquisitor and executioner, all in one. Sanjaya felt no gratitude for this but was not without goodwill. After all, Devala was a Firewright and a loyal one. It was the third man in the group whom Sanjaya remained most wary of: Sukadeva Vasishta Varuni, son of the former Vyasa of the Firstborn, Krishna Dwaipayana.

When Dwaipayana, the brilliant kingmaker and immaculate political master had retired from Aryavarta's affairs in favour of the mild-mannered Markand, Sanjaya, who had been Dwaipayana's disciple, had put the opportunity to good use to reduce his first rival, Emperor Dharma Yudhisthir, to nothing. But he had barely had any time to revel in the accomplishment, for it was then that the usually mild-mannered, insipid Suka had come forward to reveal himself as a creature of ambition – a fact few in Aryavarta, including Suka's father, would believe.

From that moment on, Sanjaya had felt as though he had caught the proverbial tiger by its tail, though Suka's trade with Sanjaya had been a simple one: together, they would lead the Empire towards war, towards the very brink of darkness. And then, when all seemed lost, together they would offer the desperate rulers of the realm their one chance at peace – on their own terms. Suka would be Vyasa of a new Firstborn Order, one that would harness the science and weaponry of the Firewrights to fuel its own moral imperative. The Firewrights, in turn, would be forgiven, legitimized, even revered once again, at the small cost of pledging allegiance to their new leader, Devala. As for Sanjaya – he would become Emperor of Aryavarta, a ruler mightier than any the realm had ever seen.

It was, Suka had convinced them both, a plan to mutual benefit, provided they could stand united against their common enemy: Govinda Shauri. Despite their unimpeachable unity in hatred, Sanjaya still harboured suspicion, particularly given his current surrounds – the dungeons set in the very bowels of Hastina, where many a Firewright had met a painful,

undignified death. Then again, there had been the final inducement, the ultimate bait that Suka had held out that had convinced Sanjaya – convinced him so thoroughly, in fact, that he in turn had prevailed on Devala, though without sharing the reasons for his newfound trust in the Firstborn. Suka, Sanjaya knew, was aware of the identity of the last Secret Keeper of the Firewrights.

Behind them, the door opened.

Devala whipped around, but Sanjaya could not help but remain as he was, watching Suka, the chiselled lines of the younger man's profile made more elegant by the play of light and shadow from the array of torches outside that threw their beams into the room. He reminded himself of the reason they were here and turned towards the doorway.

Two hulking men, each one far larger than Sanjaya or his companions, entered the room, dragging something – or someone – between them. The men were dressed in the fashion of Danava mercenaries, but bore the universal look of malice that marked those of a violent trade. As they drew near, it became clear that the limp figure between them was a woman and had been a recent recipient of their violence in ways unique to her gender. Her garments were in tatters, tears and stains showing where her captors had grabbed and pawed at her, and her face was bruised, as if she had been slapped over and over. With a grunt of disdain, the two mercenaries threw her on the floor in the middle of the room. One of them spoke to the other in their native tongue, pointing to the chain that was suspended from the ceiling. The second mercenary waved off the idea and kicked the woman once in the stomach before leaving the room. His companion threw a toothy grin at the waiting men before following him out. Clearly, they judged their prisoner to be incapable of escape.

'Well?' Suka asked, staring at the woman before them.

Sanjaya said, 'I cannot say. I have met the Yavana woman before, when she came on a diplomatic visit to Hastina. But I cannot tell if this… creature…before us is indeed her.'

Suka looked as though he had a harsh response, but before he could say a word Devala's voice cut through the room. 'You! Woman! Is your name

Philista?’

The sound of her name invoked life in the insentient woman. Slowly, she pulled herself up onto her knees. Her hands, bruised and cut, came up in a weak bid to push her grime-stained hair back to reveal bright blue eyes. Eyes, Sanjaya noted, that would have been attractive but for the way they were now swollen and bloodshot.

‘Are you Philista?’ Devala barked, apparently unaffected by the utter destruction of the woman before him.

‘Yes,’ she said, the word indistinct through her swollen lips. ‘

Speak up!’

Her voice came again, louder but also harsher for the effort. ‘I…I am Philista.’

‘We have some questions for you. Answer truthfully, and we will help you. Tell us the whole truth, and we can get you out of here. But be warned, a single lie, and wild boars will feast on your flesh this very night.’

‘Many…’ she began, faltering as blood and saliva dribbled out the side of her slack, most likely broken, jaw. She looked down at the red slime, as though realizing for the first time her state of existence beyond the pain she had most certainly endured. It seemed to give her an unexpected strength. She spoke again, patiently enunciating the words into coherence. ‘Many have feasted on my flesh already. I…I doubt there is much left for the boars. And speaking of pigs…’ She turned to Sanjaya, her swollen eyes filling with recognition, and then again to Devala. ‘Devala…and Sanjaya Gavalgani of the Kurus…I know you… But your scholarly companion…is not someone I recognize.’ A question formed in her pained frown as her eyes shifted to the ochre-clad Acharya.

Suka did not hesitate. ‘My name is Sukadeva. I am the son of Krishna Dwaipayana of the line of Vasishta Varuni.’

‘Aah, the future V…Vyasa of the Firstborn. Fills my heart to see you alongside two Firewrights…’ She laughed with a rasp, blood and dribble spraying from her mouth. ‘Oh yes, I know their true identity… So, what… is it I can do for you es…esteemed noblemen?’

Devala made to answer, but Suka raised a restraining hand. He said, in a voice as mild as Devala's had been vicious, 'Govinda Shauri.'

The sheer mention of the name had a palpable effect. Devala's lips curled with malice and Sanjaya swallowed back the rising bile. Philista smiled. 'And what has he done now?' she said, her voice softening as though a mother were asking about her truant child.

'He is coming here. Even as we speak, he enters the city.'

'Here?' A distant look filled Philista's eyes. 'Where is this place? Where am I?'

'Do you not know?'

'No. I was…taken captive as I was heading north from Dwaraka towards a bay…where…where my ship awaited me.' Her voice once again found strength as she remembered the torment she had suffered. 'They… they threw me into a cart and we set off. Some time during the night, they began getting into the cart, in twos and threes… After that…I don't know…'

The statement made all three men uncomfortable, Sanjaya the most, for this had been his idea and he had gone ahead despite Suka's caution. He had known well what was likely – one expected no better from Danava mercenaries. Their violence, he had reasoned, would spare him and his companions the necessity of torturing a woman, for Philista, he believed, held the single piece of information that could change everything. He said, 'You are at Hastina. We had you brought here as soon as we heard of Govinda Shauri's intentions.'

'Which are?' She let her head droop, coughing from the effort of speech.

'Ostensibly to broker peace between Syoddhan Kauravya and the exile Dharma Yudhisthir. Now that Dharma has garnered the support of Matsya's rebel scum, Govinda finds it convenient to ally with him once again.'

Philista lifted her head to look directly at Suka. 'Govinda could never really stay put and keep his nose out of others' affairs.' Her eyes moved from Suka to the other two men. 'I can understand why a Firstborn might

find his imminent arrival disconcerting. But surely that news is welcome to Sanjaya and Devala?'

Sanjaya felt his heart fall yet again at the thought of how it ought to have been so, but was not. In the aftermath of the Great Scourge, when the Firewrights were all but extinct, the feeble rumours of a last plan, of a hidden Secret Keeper who would some day rise to resurrect and lead the ancient Order, had been all that had kept hope alive. Over time, the promise had turned to prophecy, but the prophecy had then been lost as myth. When the truth had finally emerged, it had seemed to both Sanjaya and Devala that the myth had been preferable: There was indeed a Secret Keeper, but his identity, and consequently his allegiance, was held by the one man both of them considered their greatest enemy.

Devala appeared to share the emotion, for he snapped, 'Vathu! We do not have to explain ourselves to you! Answer our questions, woman, else I have no scruples about beating it out of you.'

'Hush, Devala!' Suka intervened. He held Philista's gaze as he bent down, his manner somehow turning the conciliatory gesture into a menacing warning. Bringing his lips close to her ear, he whispered, 'There will be no need for such threats. Not with one as intelligent as she is. She knows what terrible times lie ahead. War is an undeniable possibility, and when it comes it will not leave her people, the Yavanas, untouched. Of course, if we can stop Govinda, it may prevent such terrible bloodshed…'

'If you think that you can use me as leverage, you are wrong,' Philista said.

The words made Devala lose some of his aggression and he found himself following Suka's conciliatory tone. 'Leverage? When has Govinda cared about anyone, especially those who have cared for him? No, you are not leverage. But you may hold information that determines the destinies of your people and ours… Don't confuse love with loyalty.'

Philista stared at the three men through brimming tears. At length, her shoulders slumped in defeat and the defiant spark in her eyes faded into stony emptiness. 'There is only one thing you could want from me. You want to know who the Secret Keeper is, don't you?'

Suka made to respond, but she continued, turning towards Sanjaya and Devala, ‘Look at you! You would rather ally yourself with the Firstborn, your sworn enemies, than join hands with those who share your cause… Why? Because you cannot bear to let go of power. And here we have the Firstborn, who are ready to sanctify and accept those they once condemned, as long as they swear allegiance to the Firstborn way of life. To all of you, the end justifies the means. I don’t think the Secret Keeper, whoever he or she may be, should be any different from you, and I have no reason to protect him or her. If I say nothing of the Secret Keeper’s identity, it is because I do not know.’

‘You may think you don’t know,’ Devala argued. ‘But surely that cowherd has said or done something, let his guard down at some time… perhaps after an intimate moment?’

‘We had better things to do at and after intimate moments.’ She added, scathing, ‘You will stop at nothing, isn’t it? Are you so convinced of your beliefs, your notions, that you…’

‘How dare you judge us, you worthless whore?’ Devala said.

‘Judge you? For that you need to stand for a cause. If there is a whore in this room, it is not I…aah!’ A cry of pain escaped her as Devala slammed the hilt of his sword into her stomach.

‘Stop it!’ Sanjaya and Suka pulled Devala away before he could hit her again.

A defiant silence fell over the group, though it seemed to Sanjaya and Devala that unspoken words passed between Suka and Philista. After some time the scholar nodded as though they had reached a satisfactory conclusion. He turned to Devala. ‘Kill her. Make it smooth. If we leave her alive, those animals…’

‘But…’

‘Do it!’

Relief showed on Philista’s face as Devala finally pulled out a small hunting knife and knelt down next to her. He pressed the hilt of the knife into her hands. She smiled, closed her eyes and thrust the dagger into her breast without a word. As the pain flooded her body, her eyes flew open and

she clawed once at the air. But her agony did not last long. Devala added his weight to the butt of the knife, twisting it deep into her flesh till it pierced her heart. Philista was dead before her body hit the ground.

Sanjaya moved back as fresh warm blood made its way across the stone floor. Suka, however, remained as he was, staring down at the remains of a once-beautiful human being. His lips moved, soundless, as though he was saying a prayer over the corpse. Devala sighed, withdrew his blade and wiped it off before returning it to its sheath. Then he joined his companions.

The three men walked in silence as they left the dungeons for the crisp, clean dawn mist that hung over the palace of Hastina. It was only once the vast distance between the garrison and the main royal quarters had been covered that Devala's impatient voice interrupted the soothing rhythm of their feet on level pebble pathways: 'If only we knew who the Secret Keeper was…'

Suka said, 'You'd do what? Kill him?'

'Kill him, turn him to our cause, imprison him…or her.'

'A woman as Secret Keeper?' Sanjaya sounded amused, all the more so for seeing that Suka had deftly avoided revealing what he knew.

Devala made no response, but Suka did, sticking out his lower lip in thought. 'They say that Ghora Angirasa once intended for his great-granddaughter to lead them all.'

Sanjaya said, 'What happened to her?'

'I heard she died. As did her brother. But if that is true, it is no surprise, I suppose…'

'Why not?' Devala asked.

The conversation ebbed as an anxious attendant ran up to them. Sanjaya spoke in hushed tones with the man and dismissed him before turning to the others. 'They are waiting for us.'

Suka smiled. 'So it begins. And there you have the answer to your very pertinent question, Devala. *Why not?* Because death is what inevitably comes to those who place their trust in Govinda Shauri. Now, it is time to see how many more shall share that fate.'

2

HASTINA, BHISMA DEVAVRATA OBSERVED, WAS UNUSUALLY COLD for the time of year. He tried not to think of the summers and springs of his youth, but failed as he looked out over the mist-covered ground, oblivious to the wind that blew in through the window. Age was yet to take its toll on him, and he instinctively attributed this to the true Kuru blood that ran in him. This thought, too, he quickly dispelled. He was not the last of the true Kurus. By law and by divine will, and as a result of multiple acts of surrogacy, the line continued.

Decades ago, when his half-brother, Vichitravirya, had died without an heir, the stability and future of the entire Kuru kingdom had been threatened. Bhisma could never think of what had happened next without a churning in his stomach, which he steadfastly refused to identify as guilt. Even under the circumstances, Bhisma had refused to break his vow of chastity to ensure the continuity of the Kuru line, and it had fallen to Krishna Dwaipayana to sire, as a surrogate, the princes Pandu and Dhritarastra. Surrogacy had been needed, once more, when the Kuru line failed yet again with King Pandu. Dharma Yudhisthir and his brothers had been born to Pandu's queens Pritha and Madri through interventions of a more discreet nature. Nevertheless, Dhritarastra's children consistently held that fact against their cousins, particularly once their father had become king.

Not all of Dhritarastra's children, Bhisma reminded himself, as he took in the room and its occupants.

His eyes came to rest on Syoddhan, Dhritarastra's eldest son, the young, lithe prince of his memory now a powerful, handsome man in the prime of

his life. In Syoddhan's eyes Bhisma saw the same, silent need for approval that had so often surfaced in his nephew's youth. Perhaps, he told himself, it was time to place his faith in the prince, after all.

As though to emphasize the notion, a voice intruded on Bhisma's thoughts: 'You see then, Grandsire, what is at stake here. It is not land or titles or wealth. Our spies tell us that the Firewrights who remain, this alleged Secret Keeper included, have chosen to part ways with Govinda and his cause. It is obvious to them, as it must be to us, that staying on his path puts our very way of life at threat. Dharma Yudhisthir's claim to have Indraprastha returned to him questions the basis on which his throne and his title were lost. It questions the very hierarchy that has made Aryavarta what it is today. Above all, it questions the moral authority, the notion of Divine Order that determines good and bad. *That* will have consequences which cannot be underestimated.'

Suka paused, letting his words sink in before he continued, 'Once again, it falls to the Kurus and Firstborn to protect this noble realm, and the Divine Order that it mirrors. Destiny has not been kind to you, Grandsire, or to my father. Whatever your personal differences may be, both you and he have given your lives, your happiness, to ensure that Aryavarta becomes the reflection of the celestial realms on earth, a truly noble land. Like you, he too desires peace. He desires that his grandchildren may live in mutual affection. But at what cost? Surely…'

Shakuni, Syoddhan's maternal uncle, intervened, 'Oh, I don't think the Grandsire needs convincing, Acharya. He knows well that Divine Order, as maintained by the kings and the Firstborn, is what decides whether my brother-in-law here was, in fact, the rightful heir of King Vichitravirya of the Kurus, or merely a bastard son of his widow and another man.'

Bhisma spun around to address Syoddhan, though his words were directed at Shakuni. 'There never was,' he hissed, as though daring anyone to disagree, 'and has never been, anything immoral about the surrogacy!'

Ignoring the conciliatory nod that came as response, Bhisma walked over to Syoddhan, so far a silent spectator to the proceedings, and placed a

warm hand on the younger man's shoulder. It was an unusual gesture that held more affection than the Grandsire had shown Syoddhan in many years.

Syoddhan faced his grand-uncle with resolution, struggling to acknowledge the display of faith without letting his joy show through. Before he could speak, however, Bhisma said, 'I am sworn to Kuru to defend this kingdom, this line, and its honour. As far as I am concerned, to question the legitimacy of the Kuru court's justice is to question our right to rule. I do not approve of what happened; I believe that ill-fated dice game will remain a blight on the glory of this line. But that is no reason to allow the dynasty to fall. Syoddhan is the rightful ruler of Kuru, and by consequence of his actions, the overlord of Aryavarta.'

'But…' The sole voice of dissent came from Vidur, half-brother to Dhritarastra. Bhisma had always thought it poetic justice that the wise Suta embodied all the qualities desired in a king, but did not have the right to rule the kingdom. It was rare for him not to seek Vidur's counsel or to ignore his direction. Yet, the times had changed. 'Do you question my judgement, Vidur?' he asked.

'No, Grandsire. But I question the political motivations of others in this room. Have we made a genuine attempt at peace, before we resign ourselves to war in the name of Divine Order? For months now, Dharma's emissary, Dhaumya, has come and gone with terms of negotiation and lesser terms still. He offers peace in return for what is undoubtedly fair – the empire is Dharma's by right. Yet Syoddhan has found nothing worth accepting, even discussing. It would appear that he is determined to *not* find anything satisfactory… And he has put this time to good use, mustering his forces and those of his vassals, preparing for the war he is determined to have.'

'And do you think Dharma does otherwise?' Syoddhan said. 'He too, like us, has been preparing his armies and plotting his moves. The only reason Govinda Shauri comes here now is because he knows, whether Dharma does or not, that from this point on, time is not on their side. They are as prepared as they can ever be, and to wait any longer will be to their disadvantage and our advantage. He is the one determined to have this war.'

‘Are you not listening to me? Have you not heard a word I’ve just said?’ For a moment, Vidur sounded far more like his mighty half-brother Dhritarastra than his usual, soft-spoken self. He continued in the same tone, ‘This discussion is not about the viability of war, but about its morality.’

Suka said, ‘If I may…Morality is a subtle thing. It would be immoral to not fight a war we are bound to win, just as it would be unthinkable that we not win a war when we fight to preserve Divine Order and our way of life. Surely, Vidur, you know that! Or does affection for Dharma and his brothers affect your judgement, that you call into question the Grandsire’s?’

‘Why you…!’

In all his life, no one had ever heard Vidur speak a harsh word but the possibility that he might now do so threatened to prove Suka’s assertions of irrationality beyond all doubt. It was enough for Bhisma. ‘Vathu, Vidur! The acharya is right. There is no room for dispute. I will serve Syoddhan and this nation till my final breath, on the battlefield or in the assembly. We will prevail. Divine Order will prevail.’

The categorical assertion drew many reactions, mostly of jubilation. The Grandsire’s declaration of loyalty gave Syoddhan both moral and martial advantage, a fact that was not lost on the others in the room, particularly Syoddhan’s numerous brothers. Dhritarastra fought back tears of joy, while Dussasan drew Syoddhan into a hearty embrace while spewing profanities meant for Dharma and his brothers. Shakuni gave the brooding Syoddhan a look of admiration.

Bhisma did not miss the exchanges that filled the room, nor did he ignore the sense of foreboding that filled his heart. But he had no choice. Once, he too had placed his faith in Govinda Shauri; like Dwaipayana, he had believed that Govinda was one of them, one who understood what it meant to be Arya, to be noble. Now that Govinda had failed… He gave Syoddhan’s shoulder another squeeze and turned away to stare out of the window once again.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Dussasan draw Sanjaya into a hushed conversation, at the end of which Dussasan signalled to a figure that waited in the shadows, just outside the room. Bhisma did not turn to see

who it was. He did not want to know. After all, he reminded himself, morality was a subtle thing.

3

GOVINDA SHAURI MOVED THROUGH THE THICKET WITH THE quiet grace of a wild animal, convinced that his quarry remained completely oblivious to his presence. He smiled to himself as he thought of how a similar trap had been the undoing of six enemy soldiers just three days ago. That affair had been bloody, and the enemy less difficult to deceive. His present object of pursuit, however, was of a different order, in more ways than one.

Indeed, as he stepped into the empty clearing she said, without looking up from a sheaf of parchment that was covered with her neat, quick markings, ‘I was waiting for you, Govinda.’

Govinda gave no indication of his original intent to surprise her. ‘Interesting lesson today?’ he began, walking over to where a large tree let its thick roots spread down a gentle slope towards the nearby river, to find her settled, as she often was, in the natural cradle at its base.

‘Very!’ the woman replied. ‘Did you know that the human heart is shaped like an inverted lotus? And that in the average person it is located precisely…’

‘Precisely…?’ Govinda prompted, sitting down next to her.

‘Well, as precise as one might get after you’ve cut open a hundred dead bodies, I suppose. But will you listen! The heart…’

‘And why would the average person find this interesting at all?’

‘It depends on what the average person wants, Govinda. This knowledge might save a life. Knowing exactly where the human heart is and how it works gives us a chance to help a weak heart function better, or even get a stopped heart to beat again.’

‘And so it is that the Firewrights will bring the dead back to life. Do you know how many times over the Firstborn would want to kill you for that idea? Life and death is the domain of divinity, of destiny, as far as they are concerned.’

‘And compassion is the domain of humanity. Besides, it’s not like the only use this information can be put to is to revive the dead. It can make one a better killer, it can help one design deadly weapons. I guess that’s also part of what the Firewrights do, isn’t it? In fact, that is what we are most likely to do. Perhaps we are better off hunted down and destroyed.’

The statement made Govinda frown. ‘You shouldn’t say such things out aloud, little one.’

‘Oh, come on. It’s just the two of us here. Stop being such a diplomat and speak your mind!’

‘My mind,’ Govinda turned back to jesting, ‘is even less interesting than my heart. But since you insist: You’re right. We are better off destroyed. Yet it’s only natural that we – I speak of the entire Order here – we act to survive, as every other creature does. But when the day comes it won’t be some external force that destroys us. We will end ourselves, little one, we will end ourselves because reason will dictate it. It is but a matter of time.’

‘If that is what you truly think,’ she said, ‘why did you bother to save the Yadus? Why not let them destroy each other through civil war? Why move them from Mathura to Dwaraka? And what of Garud’s people? Why did you save them? Why save anyone, Govinda? What is it about humanity that makes it worth doing all that you do?’

Govinda sighed, exasperated. ‘Must we go over this again?’

She turned to him and laid a hand over his. ‘Don’t save something because of what it is, Govinda, because you think it worth saving. Save it because of who *you* are. Let compassion guide you, not reason.’

Govinda responded with a stubborn yet indulgent reticence. In response, she pouted, childlike. He studied her for a while, overcome with the desire to run his thumb over her lower lip. He fought that impulse and the others that followed as both reason and emotion clamoured to justify his giving in.

She had been a child when he had first met her, but she was a woman now, an intelligent, strong-willed adult. Surely, it was not inappropriate to…?

The question formed the answer: It was always inappropriate. She was the daughter of a man he considered his teacher, and the great-granddaughter of Ghora Angirasa, Secret Keeper of the Firewrights. It was, conventional morality decreed, treachery of the highest order to entertain such thoughts.

As though she knew exactly what was running through his mind, she said, ‘Ah yes, the old objectification argument. I am …property… aren’t I? A thing in my father’s keeping to do with as he sees fit? For all your talk, Govinda, you see me the same way. Else…’

‘Else…?’

‘Never mind! As you rightly pointed out, what could anyone find interesting about the human heart?’

Govinda laughed. The veiled meaning of her words seemed to him as obvious as the emotions she tried to hide. ‘Believe me,’ he said, pushing a windblown strand of her hair away from her dark cheeks, ‘I find nothing more interesting than your heart. But…’

‘But you’re afraid that you will break it, some day.’

‘Yes.’

It was her turn to laugh. ‘You will, Govinda. You need to accept that, not fear it. You see, the more you break my heart, the more I will know that you care for me. Now come along; the Secret Keeper is waiting for his cowherd prince…or, should I say Commander? Come, he says he has much to discuss with us.’ She made to get up, but Govinda caught her wrist and leaned in close, feeling the quickening of her pulse, letting the smell of lotuses that was uniquely hers wash over him like life-giving rain. He breathed in deep. The fragrance filled him completely from the inside. And then he let go.

‘Commander? Commander, we are here.’

Govinda Shauri looked up as the vehicle came to a stop. The memory of her fragrance faded, bringing him uncomfortably back to the present. For

once, he had chosen to make the journey to Hastina in a carriage, rather than on horseback. Such symbolic gestures, he knew, were important when dealing with the formal, tradition-bound Kurus. To arrive on a stallion was to suggest virility and aggression whereas to amble in by horse-drawn carriage carried subtle suggestions of conciliation and diplomacy. As things stood, no gesture was too deferential, not after months of negotiation by the able and mild-mannered Acharya Dhaumya had failed.

'Commander?' Daruka, Govinda's trusted captain, prompted again.

'Thank you,' Govinda said. He got out of the carriage, bracing himself against the gust of wind that hit him. Daruka dismounted from his seat as driver and wrapped a cloak around him.

Govinda smiled at the man and said, offhand, 'By the way, you really should stop calling me that, you know. I'm no longer Commander of Dwaraka's armies.'

'You'll always be my commander, Commander,' Daruka insisted, a smile playing on his lips. Then he said, his voice more serious, 'But there are also times when you will simply be Govinda, the young, rebellious gwala I met… By Rudra! Has it been so long?'

'It has,' Govinda said, shrugging to settle the cloak closer around him. 'And you've stood by me through much, in all these years. But what lies ahead…' Govinda stared hard at the looming outline of the palace of Hastina, but his expression eased as he caught sight of an approaching figure. 'Well, Uncle?' he addressed the newcomer. 'What news? Or will you say that your allegiance to the Kurus prevents you from telling me?'

Vidur walked up to the carriage to greet Govinda with an embrace, but his mind was clearly on other things. 'There is nothing that you won't find out for yourself in a few moments, Govinda, so I might as well tell you.'

Govinda laughed. 'Let's get the obvious out of the way first, shall we? I suppose by now Bhisma Devavrata has decided on his stand?'

'Yes. He favours Syoddhan.'

'That is hardly unexpected. The Grandsire, Acharya Dron, Vasusena of Anga, Jayadrath…their choice of allegiance to Syoddhan was never in

question. What remains to be tested, however, is the strength of their influence; particularly Bhisma's influence over Dhrupad of Panchala.'

'And your brother's loyalty? Does that also remain to be tested?'

'Balabadra? What about him?'

'Perhaps it is despite him, rather than because of him,' Vidur said, 'but your Federation has made its choice. Dwaraka will stand by Syoddhan. Kritavarman arrived last night bearing the news. You must understand your brother's decision, Govinda. He believes that your actions have condemned your people… He fears for them, as any good leader should.'

'I understand,' Govinda said, glancing at a resigned Daruka. 'Dwaraka aligns with Syoddhan for more than one reason – in the least only because he is the more powerful one. Unfortunately, that is all the more reason why I act. We see the world in terms of power and legitimacy, might and action. Such a world is doomed by its own inevitable oppressiveness. It will decay… But I digress,' he finished, with a shake of his head.

Vidur took the opportunity to add, 'Kritavarman is not alone. Yuyudhana is here too. I could tell his heart is not in the Council's decision, but as the current Commander of Dwaraka's armies I suppose he has no choice. Also…'

'Also?'

'Philista, your…friend.'

Govinda gazed into the distance as he asked, 'Is she dead yet?'

'Yes. Govinda, I…'

Govinda raised a hand, cutting Vidur off. 'Then there is nothing more to be said about her. Come, they must be waiting for us.'

4

A BARD HAD ONCE SAID OF HASTINA'S ASSEMBLY HALL THAT NONE could step into it without gasping in amazement, yet the true marvel lay in that no two people were ever amazed by the same thing. Indeed, it was claimed, there were so many things to look upon that one could hardly predict where the gaze would go: The great Elephant Throne that stood on a dais at the far end of the hall, the painted ceiling that, through high windows, took its colours from the changing sky outside, or the images of celestials, drawn to such lifelike proportions that it seemed Indra's own assembly stared with awe at that of the Kurus. Jewel-bedecked seats, each of the one hundred thrones made for the Kuru princes included, gold-covered pillars with their ornamental statues, the bearing and might of the princes and warriors who occupied the space – the hall of the Kuru kings was breathtaking in its entirety, and over and over again in its details.

Govinda's eyes, however, rested on one thing alone: The pristine white marble floor.

Here. Right here. Right where he stood. The stone that had been smeared with Panchali, Empress of Aryavarta's blood when Dharma Yudhisthir had lost her as a stake at dice, and the entire assembly of noble Aryas had watched as Dussasan had dragged her in and made to strip her of the robe she wore. He imagined he saw the streaks of red where Panchali had lain, her menstrual blood staining flesh, cloth and the marble floor. What had she felt then, he wondered. Shame? No, though he knew that was what society, the system, demanded that she feel: ashamed at being exposed, ashamed of her womanhood. Indeed, that was why Dussasan had

dragged her in that way, to dishonour her and thus, dishonour Dharma and his brothers, strip them of their masculinity.

Despite the horror he felt, Govinda's lips lifted in a private smile. Panchali, he knew, had felt everything but shame. Anger, defiance, possibly fear, but not shame. And now, standing here, he saw what she had seen: that like all else, she had been but a means to an end in a world that believed that as long as the ends remained justified so were the means. This fundamental principle, this irrevocable faith in the sanctity of the system, of Divine Order and its ultimate triumph had allowed numerous things to happen over the years: The Firstborn sanction of the Great Scourge; the Firewrights turning into power-mongers and peddlers of weapons, allowing men like Bhisma and those of his choosing to use, with the blessings of the Firstborn, Wright-made weapons to ensure the martial supremacy of the Kurus and their allies; at the same time, those born into the Firewright clan, such as the acharyas Dron, Kripa and Asvattama, abandoning their order to swear allegiance to the Firstborn simply in order to survive, no, not survive, but to thrive.

These great elders had sat and watched as a woman, a human being, was lost and claimed as property, not because they did not find it reprehensible or discomforting. They had watched, silent, because that was the way of the world, of Divine Order. Because the ends justified the means. *Sacrifice an individual for a family, a family for a village, and a village for a nation*… A trade Govinda had always considered worthy till Panchali, an individual, had stood larger than an empire and called into question the very principle he had lived by. Till compassion had taught him what reason had not: the system must be worth the sacrifice. And a system that could not protect those it was meant to serve was a failure.

Drawing himself out of his reverie, Govinda faced the packed assembly with determined eyes. The hall held all the expected occupants: Vasusena, Asvattama, Acharyas Dron and Kripa, King Jayadrath, as well as emissaries and representatives from Syoddhan's newfound allies. Sanjaya had taken his usual position of influence, standing behind Syoddhan's throne. Though

it was not totally unexpected, it still came as a mild surprise to Govinda to see Devala Asita openly at Sanjaya's side.

In keeping with tradition, a whole upper corridor of the assembly hall was filled with ochre-clad figures – the large group of Firstborn scholar-seers, from acolyte to elder, who oversaw and maintained the great library of Hastina. Govinda did not miss the near-inconspicuous presence of Suka, Dwaipayana's spiritual heir, nor did he fail to see how the Firstborn strove to maintain the semblance of an apolitical stance. Suka could have, by all rights, occupied a throne in the main assembly area, and that too in a position of importance comparable to Acharyas Dron and Kripa. But he did not. It was, to Govinda, the ultimate proof that the Firstborn had no intention of being apolitical at all.

His cumbersome arrival in a chariot rig, the preceding messages of conciliation and the need for diplomacy all forgotten, Govinda let the hard anger he felt come through as sarcasm. 'Well, well,' he began. 'You're all early risers, I see. Is that a matter of habit, or have I merited your special welcome? In any case, morning greetings to you all.'

It was the utter lack of reaction on Syoddhan's part that made Govinda turn, just in time. Even as he moved, his Yadu kinsmen, Kritavarman and Yuyudhana, leapt to his side, but they were too late.

The attack was a well-planned one, in both a strategic and a political sense. Many things happened at once. In a seemingly innocent move, the omnipresent serving girls who plied food and drink on the assembly clustered in a group right behind Govinda, effectively shielding Syoddhan, Dhritarastra and others of importance in the assembly. At the same time, one of the handmaidens dropped her wine-cask, apparently in shock, and a viscous liquid that certainly was not wine snaked its way across the floor, providing a further barrier. To allow oneself to be distracted by these small events would prove fatal, for the true danger came from the other direction.

A sudden throng burst in through the main doorway and surged forward. At first sight, it gave the impression of a mob of angry commoners, a fact strengthened by their chants, both those affirming Syoddhan's rule over Hastina and Aryavarta as well as those calling for the death of the traitor,

Govinda Shauri. But a little attention revealed that the chants sounded rehearsed, and that the members of the mob were far too organized and well-armed to be anything but soldiers.

It was, Govinda realized, a perfect trap. Not only did this apparent public outburst exonerate Syoddhan of all responsibility for Govinda's safety as an emissary, but it also put Govinda in the heinous position of having to attack hapless commoners – an unacceptable show of aggression that would compromise his position and Dharma's at once. He could not help but register Devala Asita's touches, not only in the planning of the attack but also in the small details: the wine-like liquid, the small, concealed weapons that the pretend commoners now produced from inside their clothing. The assault, as much as it was intended to do away with Govinda, was also meant to be a demonstration of Syoddhan's power to his allies.

'Rudra save us!' Kritavarman exclaimed next to Govinda, clearly sharing the latter's assessment of the situation.

Yuyudhana was more direct. 'Sons-of-whores! It's a trap, Govinda!'

Both men drew their swords, preparing to go down with a fight. Govinda stood his ground, fists clenched, searching the mad throng for the one face he had missed in the assembly, the one face that could change everything about the situation. And then he saw the large figure skulking at the back of the throng, the clear leader of the mob despite his position. The man's gaze brimmed over with bloodlust, a feral madness that left Govinda in no doubt as to his identify. Just as he had thought… Dussasan. A small, lightning-like spark exploded in the air right where Govinda stood, turning instantly into fire and smoke.

Govinda waited for the cries – mostly of alarm, but some of pain – to subside before turning around, a smile on his lips, to consider the scene, the cause for the stunned expressions writ on each face in the assembly. A wall of flame, dancing golden and blue, rose almost to the high roof of the hall. Against the curtain of fire and smoke stood Govinda, Kritavarman and Yuyudhana. A fleeting memory of a similar moment swept through Govinda's mind as the soft crackle of fire filled the air. *A coronation and a*

beheading. Shisupala. He looked toward Syoddhan, met the anger he found there with confident understanding. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he caused the wall of flame to descend and finally disappear. All that remained of the earlier episode was a mass of prone, bleeding, soot-stained forms, the light rise and fall of their chests the only sign of life in the men who had attacked them.

Adjusting the Wright-metal bracelet on his wrist, the source of the small explosion that had proved such an effective defence, Govinda turned to Yuyudhana and Kritavarman next to him. Kritavarman, particularly, Govinda would not have faulted for being slow in coming to his aid, or not coming at all. But war was only imminent and not yet declared, and Kritavarman had chosen to show unity with his fellow Dwaraka citizens. Smiling his thanks at his kinsmen, Govinda returned his attention to Syoddhan and the others. ‘I find this a rather novel welcome on your brothers’ part, Syoddhan. Though I must admit, Prince Dussasan and your other brothers look rather becoming in their guise as commoners. They bring a certain… authenticity…to the role, don’t you agree?’

Syoddhan did not respond to Govinda’s sarcasm, but with the silence thus broken a growl of a murmur rose all around. To attack an emissary was against law and morality, an act of dishonour and cowardice. Had Dussasan succeeded, the crime would have been its own redemption, but the Kuru prince’s failure was a fault in itself, one that left palpable awkwardness in its wake.

The situation would have persisted, but for Vidur’s intervention. ‘See to the injured,’ he called out to the omnipresent attendants. In response, a host of servants ran to aid Dussasan and his companions, while others went to summon the medics. The crisp efficiency of the Kurus quickly restored order to the room, with all debris cleared and the injured moved out, except for an insistent Dussasan. The impressive efforts at housekeeping, however, did little to restore what little air of conciliation may have remained.

Govinda’s eyes ran over the recently cleaned surrounds, noting that the same marble that had occupied his entire attention when he had first entered this hall was, in fact, well-worn and the walls of the palace reeked of past

grandeur and dust. The men around him, too, gave the impression of being tired and weary, and youthful faces and eager hearts were few and far between. If any man stood out in that jaded, time-worn lot, it was Bhisma.

The Grandsire was unchanged, his hair and beard the same white since the very day Govinda had first encountered the elder. His towering, powerful build, sharp intellect and impeccable ability to maintain his calm under duress had all endured, the last quality in clear evidence at the moment. By contrast, Govinda found Dhritarastra withered. Age clearly showed on the king's face as he stared with incomprehension and awe, a sentiment that most in the hall mirrored – except for Dron and Asvattama, as well as Devala and Vasusena. Clearly, Govinda's methods had not come as a shock to them.

Govinda smiled at the thought, but said nothing of it out loud. Instead, he declared, 'With your permission, I shall leave now. Dharma will be expecting me…'

'You make no offer of peace…?' Syoddhan's voice held no expectation as he said the words, and his face remained devoid of expression, as it had been since Govinda had entered the hall. It was a feat that many knew the prince could not have managed some decades ago. But much had come to pass over the years, which had left a mark on the man in significant ways. Syoddhan's newfound equanimity, both practised and effortless, was a quality that Govinda found most suggestive and he saw no sense in further baiting or in games. He asked, his voice sincere, 'Will you consider peace?'

Syoddhan said, 'On reasonable terms, yes.'

'I am known to be a reasonable man.'

'My brothers might disagree.'

'If,' Govinda said, with a sidelong glance at Dussasan, 'you play with fire, you must risk getting burnt.'

'It is not fire that is the problem here, Govinda. It is that you are a Firewright.'

'A fact that has been long in evidence and needs no further discussion. Which is why I made no attempt to hide it. Why do you bring it up now?'

‘Only to add that even the Wrights found you to be a heretic and far too untrustworthy. There is no one you have not betrayed yet. The only rational thought one expects of you is that which is driven by your self-interest. So do me the courtesy of being plain. State *your* terms, Govinda Shauri, for that is what these negotiations are truly about.’

Govinda shrugged. ‘I don’t care what you call my *terms*, or me – as long as you consider them. I thought I had made them clear, but since there seems to be some doubt: I wish you to declare Dharma Yudhisthir the rightful Emperor of Aryavarta.’

Cries of outrage rang through the hall, with Dussasan too calling out weak protests from the secluded corner of the hall where he was being tended to. Others such as Vasusena were more vocal, and Bhisma Devavrata appeared far from pleased. If any remained placid, it was those who were affected more by the consequences of the statement than its content. Sanjaya and Devala were pointedly taciturn. The Firstborn scholar-seers continued to mumble prayers for the welfare of all, Suka amongst them.

Syoddhan gestured for calm, but it took some prompting by others in the hall before the uproar faded into a buzz. He then said, ‘You really wish me to accede to Dharma Yudhisthir? Do you not know that there is no greater dishonour than surrender? Govinda, often have others called you “gwala”, accused you of lacking nobility, but I have never shared their opinion…till this moment. Now I must wonder, do you really not understand a thing about our way of life?’

‘You misunderstand me, Syoddhan,’ Govinda said. ‘It was not my intent to ask you to surrender. Rather, I ask you to exercise your power as the ruler of the Kuru kingdom and declare unlawful and untenable the dice game that took place here. Speak the words that you asked Panchali and Dharma’s brothers to say: that Dharma Yudhisthir had no right to wager what he did… his brothers, his wife, his people, his empire. Say that Dharma was in error and declare the gamble invalid.’

Syoddhan chuckled. ‘Dharma was in error; there is no doubt about that. But you’re a clever one, Govinda. Would not going further to declare the gamble void require that all that was lost revert to the one who played it as

stake? And would that not further imply that Dharma Yudhisthir is still Emperor of Aryavarta?

‘At its furthest extent, it would.’

‘And I cannot bear the thought of a man who could treat his people, his family, as he did being in command of all our destinies.’

‘But he would not be in command. Reinstating him only proves the limits of his power, of any Emperor’s power.’

‘One cannot protect an ideal by destroying it, and that is what you’re suggesting I do, Govinda.’

Govinda smiled. ‘The ideal is upheld not by the specific instance, but by the larger truth. Help me make the larger truth apparent. Declare that neither you nor he had the authority to make those wagers. We shall consider the Empire relinquished to you. Let Dharma remain King of Indr-prastha, as he once was.’

‘That is impossible.’

‘It is necessary. You see, it is not the moral outcome of one dice game, but two, that must be reversed. There was one last throw, where you both wagered your kingdoms. His loss was what forced him into exile. Five villages, then? Five villages would make Dharma a vassal – your vassal. It should suffice.’

‘How often must I explain, Govinda?’ Syoddhan hissed through clenched teeth. ‘That man has no moral authority to command another person, ever again. You want him to be made King? I would not make him chief of a single village; why, I think he doesn’t deserve to command those of his own household. No. I will give Dharma nothing.’

Govinda sighed and took a while to consider his next words. He then addressed the entire assembly. ‘Is there anyone here who has never made a mistake? Does not every person deserve forgiveness for their errors?’

‘They do,’ Syoddhan answered. ‘But not when their penitence is wrought by their self-interest, and the admission of error is to their benefit. I too have made mistakes, Govinda. For one, I believe I have stood by in silence far too often while wrong was done. And for that I know I will go down in our history as an ambitious, evil man, and now here I am rejecting

your so-called offer of peace as well. But such is justice. Such is Divine Order. Nothing matters more.'

'Then it is war.'

'Unless, *you* accept *my* offer of peace. Peace on my terms; fair and *reasonable* terms.'

'And what are those terms?'

It was Syoddhan's turn to smile, though what showed on his face was more of a sneer. He said, 'Sit down, Govinda. It would not do to keep an emissary of your eminence standing.'

5

FOR MANY YEARS, SYODDHAN HAD RECOGNIZED THE EMOTION he felt at the thought of Govinda Shauri to be curiosity. Govinda had been an unknown entity, a man cloaked in questions, but that had always stirred Syoddhan's interest rather than disturbed him. Now, watching Govinda as he allowed himself to be led to a well-decked seat of honour and plied with signs of welcome and hospitality, Syoddhan realized that it was not curiosity; rather, it was a contradicting mix to which he could give no appropriate name.

Syoddhan envied Govinda his conviction and despised his lack of moral allegiance. He admired Govinda's courage – for a lesser man could not have unified Aryavarta in the name of Dharma Yudhisthir – and he hated Govinda's obvious cowardice for not daring to rule the realm that he controlled, other than through his puppet emperor. He enjoyed Govinda's wit, but found his flippant nature irksome. He felt lighthearted when Govinda laughed, and cringed when he spoke. He wished Govinda were his friend. But right now, more than all of that, he wished Govinda were dead. Govinda was a Firewright and a friend to the Firstborn. Govinda was a traitor, a man with no allegiance. He was the essence of all that threatened Aryavarta, Divine Order and their noble way of life.

Syoddhan turned, as he often had, to the Grandsire, Bhisma Devavrata. He found his gaze returned. Today it was he, Syoddhan, whom Bhisma looked to with affection and trust, not Dharma Yudhisthir. It was all he could have wanted.

Letting the moment brand itself on his heart, Syoddhan said out loud, 'Dharma must submit, in public, to my authority.'

'Done,' Govinda said.

‘Don’t be hasty, Govinda. Dharma must admit that he lost all to me in fair game and declare that he holds no title, no standing whatsoever. In return, I will host him, his brothers and their families here at Hastina, in state. They will be accorded all respect that is due to them as my cousins, and shall never be in fear for their safety. On that you have my word.’

‘I don’t doubt your word. But this serves no purpose as far as reversing the policy that was set by the game. You only affirm that Dharma indeed had the right to make those wagers, and thus passed his powers on to you.’

Syoddhan briefly stared at Govinda before breaking into a harsh, mirthless laugh. ‘Ah, Govinda. For a while I really thought you cared. Peace means nothing to you, neither do loyalty and friendship. All you want is to get back the power that was yours.’

‘Not true.’

‘Is that so? Tell me, what would become of Matsya under the terms *you* propose?’

‘They would pledge allegiance to you. They would, after all, be part of your empire.’

‘How easily you throw them away, now that they are not needed.’

Govinda shrugged. ‘It is the law.’

‘I see,’ Syoddhan said. ‘By the same token, you too would pledge allegiance to me? As a representative of the Yadu nation?’ Syoddhan asked.

Govinda said, wary, ‘It is my understanding that the Yadu nation has already pledged its allegiance to you.’

Syoddhan nodded. ‘Yes, and so they send their armies to support me, if there should be war. But the question is why are you not with them?’

‘Because I act in revolt against the very system that forces Dwaraka to align with you.’

‘Then you admit it? You admit that Dwaraka is duty-bound to fight on my behalf? Including the men under your command, and Yuyudhana’s, too.’

Govinda said, expressionless. ‘Yes. The armies are bound to fight for you if the leaders so decide. But it does not bind me as an individual, though I may be called to answer under Dwaraka’s laws for my rebellion.

Unless, Syoddhan, you'd rather have me on your side than have my armies?'

'No, Govinda. I place no value on a man who is deluded. Do you even know what you fight for; what you truly want?

Govinda said, 'I would explain what it is I want, Syoddhan, but I doubt you would understand. Such gwala-talk is hardly worthy of your attention, so I shall put it this way: Since you have refused to admit that the wager was made in excess of Dharma's authority and hold it as grounds to deny him his Empire, we must categorically declare that the dice game was an act of deceit. You have wrongfully deprived Emperor Dharma Yudhisthir of his realm by deceiving him into acting in excess of his authority. The empire was his, but the gamble was not. And, by Rudra, we shall now win his empire back.'

In response, Syoddhan rose to his feet, the entire assembly following his action, save Dhritarasthra and some of the elders. Govinda too remained sitting. Syoddhan read it as the last show of defiance by a cornered man. He said, 'You only make my decisions easier, for I see now that I must destroy you before you destroy all of Aryavarta and our way of life. On your head be it, Govinda. War. And I doubt future generations will applaud you for bringing it to us.'

When Govinda spoke his voice seemed to ring through the hall. 'Do you know why they call the single dot, the losing throw at dice, "kali"? Because the greatest force in the universe is Time. It's greater than every probability, every wager, beyond the comprehension of skill. It's inevitable, because it's inexorable. It is time, Syoddhan, time for change.' Grunting in an overt show of inconvenience, Govinda finally rose to his feet. He took his time to settle his robes into place, forcing the assembly to wait for his words. 'As for our progeny cursing us for ushering in war,' he said, 'we'll just have to wait and see, won't we? Meanwhile, in the present, I do hope my friend down in your dungeons will be given the decent funeral she deserves. She was, after all, one of us.'

Govinda walked out of the assembly, flanked by Yuyudhana and Kritavarman, Vidur following close behind. He had no doubt that the man

for whom he had meant his last words had indeed heard them.

The Secret Keeper watched the blazing pyre with regret and anger, though the second of the sentiments was not directed towards the deceased woman. She had, in his eyes, done nothing regrettable but show devotion and loyalty to the wrong man. The same man who had asked that she be given a proper funeral, as she deserved. It was, the Secret Keeper noted, a mistake on Govinda's part. Even the lowliest prison menial who would not have thought twice about throwing Philista's body on a pile of wood and setting it alight for no reason other than disposal and hygiene had since hesitated to remove her cadaver from the stinking dungeon in which she had been killed. When the matter had been raised to the overseer of the section, and then to the commandant of the dungeons, and from him to the palace guard, each one had refused to comply for fear that he would be seen as faithful to Govinda and thus, to the enemy.

Finally, the Secret Keeper himself had come forward, that too in Syoddhan's presence. After all, was it not Ghora Angirasa who had once said that the best place to hide a secret was in plain sight? As expected, the offer had been considered as motivated by compassion, not collusion, and no one had since batted an eyelid at the Secret Keeper's actions.

Perhaps Govinda had not made a mistake after all. He would have known that everyone would have refused to deal with Philista's remains, leaving the Secret Keeper free to finally step in without raising suspicion. But why do so? Was it a sign that Govinda would not reveal his identity? Or did he mean to use the revelation later, as a final stroke that would turn the tide of events?

Govinda led them all to war, of that the Secret Keeper had no doubt. It was precisely why he had chosen to part ways with the man he had once considered his most trusted friend and ally. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could compromise the task that had been left to his care, the great burden that could determine the very future of Aryavarta. Not even Govinda Shauri.

6

‘READY, DARUKA?’ GOVINDA STEPPED INTO THE STONY CLEARING where he had left Daruka, the carriage and the horses while he indulged himself in a swim in the cool, swirling waters of the Yamuna. It was these tempestuous waters that he had bathed and played in every day of his childhood as a village-dwelling cowherd, and to relive those moments after the morning’s events was a pleasant reprieve. ‘Daruka?’ Govinda called again, sleeking back his wet, grey-black hair. The horses were there, but were visibly restless and their nostrils were flared.

As suspicion of what might have occurred set in, he reached for his sword, only to stop short as a voice called out, ‘Don’t move! Or he dies.’

A mercenary emerged from the cover of tree trunks holding Daruka in front of him, a jagged blade pressed against the captain’s throat. More men leapt out, some advancing towards Govinda with ready weapons, others moving to grab the horses by their reins.

‘Your sword…’ the man with Daruka said.

Moving slowly, Govinda undid the sword-belt at his waist and threw it to the ground. ‘You’re a long way from home,’ he said, speaking in the tongue of the Yavanas.

‘We go where our trade takes us. And it seems we are needed everywhere.’

‘But of course.’

‘But of course! With men like you around, Govinda Shauri, we need not fear unemployment. Sooner or later, you make trouble for the wrong people, and they decide to put an end to you and your actions.’

‘All I can say is that I’m glad your employer hired you. I was getting tired of the Danava mercenary lot. They are so predictable and easily corrupted. You men, on the other hand, I have found to be more reliable. But, you see, that makes me all the more curious. I’ve never known a Yavana soldier for hire to bother with small talk and surrender. What is it you want from me?’

The mercenary tightened this grip on Daruka, and used his sword-hand to reach for his cowl and pull it down. A hideous scar ran across his face, traversing a misshapen nose and splitting both upper and lower lip into half. Part of the cowl still obscured the sides of his face, but Govinda knew the man would also be missing an ear. ‘I wanted,’ the assassin began, ‘you to know who I am… and what I…we…did. I wanted you to know how she screamed. Philista, your precious Philista. Oh, she fought like a wildcat. We had a man holding each of her legs, pulling her thighs apart. But by the time we were done with her she had fainted. We had to hurt her just to bring her back to her senses. I liked that, I liked that part a lot.’

Govinda eyes blazed, but he remained otherwise expressionless. ‘Is that all? Shall we get on with it then?’ he asked.

‘Oh, not so soon, Govinda. I thought it might be an interesting experiment to see whether you last longer than Philista. My brother there,’ he gestured to one of the other men, ‘has wagered that you would actually enjoy it, if you know what I mean.’ As one the mercenaries burst out laughing, Daruka’s eyes widened with horror and he tried to wriggle free. His captor pressed the knife deeper, cutting a little into the skin of the captain’s throat.

‘Let him go,’ Govinda said. ‘Let him and the horses go. I’m the one you want.’

The lead mercenary spat on the ground in contempt, and then gestured to the man he had earlier identified as his brother, who pulled out his own blade and advanced towards Shaibya, one of Govinda’s four white horses. The horse, sensing the danger he was in, moved back. Taking their cue from him, the other three stallions too, began to rear and snort.

‘Wait,’ the first mercenary called to them. ‘Your turn will come, my pretties. Your hides will fetch a good price in…’ He faltered as a loud, inhuman yell of rage filled the glade. The sheer hatred and violence in the voice had all the men, including Daruka, stunned.

Govinda struck.

He did not bother with his sword or any other weapon, throwing himself bodily at the man near Shaibya. The force brought the two men to the ground, but before the Yavana could rise, or his friends could come to his help, Govinda grabbed the man’s head with both hands and bashed it against the hard ground. The mercenary’s skull broke open, his brains spilling out in a bloody, putrid mess. Govinda did not flinch. He knew he only had moments before the mercenaries and their leader reacted, though he was certain that the latter would do nothing but wait, safely holding on to Daruka. It was the others who had to be dealt with.

Govinda got to his feet, in the same move picking up the dead man’s shield and driving it right into a charging soldier’s face. Then, pulling the shield back, he threw it like a discus, beheading two men who rushed at him. A third man tried to circle around to attack him from the side, but ended up moving too close to Govinda’s horses. The steeds, already unsettled by the noise and the sense of being under attack, were pushed beyond control. Neighing and stamping, they crushed the soldier under their hooves, the man’s pitiful screams filling the glade. Two other soldiers were quick enough to move away from the rampaging horses. Govinda turned his attention to them, his blood-stained fist his only weapon. He smashed it into a mercenary’s face, feeling the man’s cheekbone shatter under the blow. Bringing his knee up, he connected with the doubled-over assailant’s ribcage, breaking through the bone to squelch his heart. The Yavana screamed; blood spurted from his mouth onto Govinda’s bare chest and soaked into his robes.

More mercenaries emerged from the cover of forest. Pausing to regain his breath, Govinda did a quick count of the men around him. Five. Six, he corrected himself, cursing aloud as a jagged blade tore through the muscles of his back and right shoulder. The dagger remained stuck there, depriving

his attacker of a weapon, as Govinda turned, wrapped his elbow around the man's neck and slammed him down to the ground, breaking his spine. The effort, however, caused the sharp blade to shift deep in Govinda's flesh, and he cried out in pain and stumbled. Sensing an advantage, two of the remaining mercenaries launched themselves at him. One drove a sword hilt into Govinda's stomach, and the other used a shield to strike a blow across his face.

Govinda managed to hit back, catching one of the men with a jaw-breaking punch, but the other moved out of his reach and struck him yet again with his shield.

'Govinda!' Daruka shouted out.

Despite throbbing pain and the spinning inside his head, Govinda wanted to smile at Daruka's use of his name. The dull thought arose in his mind that if the captain were so moved during a fight as to show concern, the two of them must really be in trouble. He tried to steady himself, but his left eye had begun to swell up from the shield-blow. He would have faltered, but right then a mercenary tried to stab Balahak, only to graze the stallion's flank instead. Balahak let out a high whinny as a red gash blossomed against his silver-white hide.

Anger renewed Govinda's strength. His thoughts of Daruka left aside, Govinda lunged at his fallen sword, Nandaka. He grabbed it by the hilt, pulling it out of its scabbard as he launched himself in the air, slashing twice with the Wright-metal weapon as he came down. Twirling his wrist, Govinda caught the last but one mercenary in the abdomen. By the time Govinda's feet had touched the ground, the glade was silent once again.

The scarred Yavana remained as he had been at the beginning of it all, just as Govinda had expected. Daruka was still in his grasp.

'You always were a peculiar man, Govinda Shauri,' the Yavana said. 'People mean little to you, isn't it? Even animals matter more to you than those who've been loyal to you. Or perhaps that is the point – the more the loyalty, the stronger your sense of ownership and the more the impunity with which you use men and women to your purposes and leave them to their fate when your task is done…' He sighed and pushed Daruka away.

The stunned captain stumbled but remained on his feet, standing between Govinda and the mercenary.

‘Your choice,’ the Yavana said. ‘You can kill your own man and make it quick for him. Or else, you can take the risk of fighting me. If you win, you save both your lives and if you lose…I can promise you his death will be a painful one. Sound familiar?’ he asked, as he saw recollection spark to life in Govinda’s eyes.

Govinda nodded. It was a conundrum, one that he had posed to Phyrro, a scholar from the city of Elis in the Yavanas’ homeland and his followers, including the mercenary before him. He had told them that reason dictated that one always choose the second option, not because it gave one a chance to save the other person, but because there would be a greater chance of saving oneself. He had explained, they had listened, and at the end of that meeting Phyrro and his fellow scholars had chosen to revive their relations with Aryavarta and the Firewrights, sharing the knowledge that the two similar groups had built over the years. It had, as many believed, changed the destinies of both nations, and not necessarily for the best. Clearly, the scarred mercenary anticipated Govinda to reaffirm his answer of old.

‘Kneel, Daruka,’ Govinda commanded. Daruka, a veteran of numerous battles, complied without question or hesitation. Govinda brought his sword to rest on the nape of Daruka’s neck. ‘My answer,’ he told the astonished mercenary, ‘has changed. Because I have changed. I once told you that reason was paramount. I was wrong. I can either let myself get buried under the burden of that mistake, or I can accept it and move on to serve a cause greater than reason.’

The Yavana’s eyes narrowed. ‘I’d be a fool to listen to any explanations that you give, ever again. Do it. Strike. And if you try any tricks, it will go badly for both of you.’ Switching his sword to the other hand, he reached out and pulled out a large axe from the harness on his back even as he sheathed his sword. Using both hands, he brought the keen but heavy blade of the axe to Govinda’s neck, mirroring the sword held at Daruka’s. ‘One move, one breath out of place, and I’ll take it out on him…’ the mercenary emphasized.

Govinda nodded. He tightened his grip on Nandaka, using the moment it gave him to observe his opponent. The Yavana's eyes were fixed on Govinda's wrists, set to judge the least deflection in the sword-stroke. If it seemed likely that Govinda was going to miss Daruka's neck, even by a chance error, the mercenary would strike, killing Govinda first and then Daruka. It was why the Yavana had chosen the axe over his sword – to ensure against the possibility that in decapitating one man the blade might remain stuck in the flesh, thus leaving him weaponless. An axe promised a clean cut through flesh and bone, making it the weapon of choice for beheadings. It also made for a very predictable opponent. This, Govinda knew, was his one chance.

'Forgive me, Daruka,' he said, lifting Nandaka high in the air, gasping from the stab of pain as the dagger in his back dug deeper into his flesh. From the corner of his eye, he saw the slight rise of the mercenary's chest as the man pulled back his axe, drawing an unerring line to Govinda's neck.

With a blood-curdling cry, Govinda slashed down. At the same time, the mercenary swung his axe, his eyes all the while on Govinda's wrists. But not on Govinda's feet. With the force of the movement that lowered his arms, Govinda kicked out with his left leg. His body tipped forward, the assassin's axe cut through the air where his head had been. At the same time, his foot hit the Yavana's wrist, cracking the bone. Govinda kept moving, his right foot now coming off the ground as he turned a full circle in the air, Nandaka grazing the silk of Daruka's upper robe as it slid, harmless, off the captain's back till the tip grazed the ground and, raising a small cloud of dust, moved on, completing its own arc to strike the Yavana mercenary on the underside of his arms, above his elbows.

By the time Govinda stood with his feet back firmly on ground, the mercenary was writhing on the ground, his arms but bloody stumps at his shoulders. Daruka let out a loud, hard breath and, at a sign from Govinda, scrambled to his feet and went to check on the horses.

Govinda picked up the fallen mercenary's axe. Without pause, he brought the heavy, short blade down on the screaming Yavana's face, wedging it through the skull into the blood-soaked ground below.

Govinda clenched his fists and bit down as hard as he could on a thick piece of leather from Balahak's bridle. Sweat beaded his forehead and he tried to stay still, but the pain was too intense. And then, just when he thought he would bite right through the leather, the burning ebbed. He let the leather bit fall from his month and gasped in relief.

'I'm yet to seal it up, Commander,' Daruka, crouched next to him, said. He held out the blade he had extricated from Govinda's back for the injured man to see as he pressed hard with his other hand to stem the bleeding.

'Do we have wine?' Govinda asked.

Daruka shook his head. 'For the fifth time, no. The bag broke during the fight. Maybe if you'd been more cautious.'

'Cautious?' Govinda said, grunting through the agony of Daruka's care. 'I didn't know what I was doing, to tell you the truth.'

'That much was apparent, Commander. One would have thought it was some thorn, not a dagger in your back. Of course, you're more than making up for it with all your whining now… The scarred man was right, you know. You've kept your calm in the trickiest of situations, but one graze on your beloved horse-friends and you were a madman. I think you forgot that I existed!'

Govinda did not dispute the statement. Chuckling, he let his head fall on to his forearms and forced his breath to come evenly.

Daruka continued, 'An old enemy?'

'He certainly wasn't an old friend, though I think he came after us on the instructions of one,' Govinda said.

'The Secret Keeper?'

'Yes. The worst adversary I could have. You see, we are enemies in principle and principle alone. We both agree on the final outcome, the importance of the task that was left to us to see through. But we no longer agree on what needs to be done to reach that outcome, and that is why we are no longer allies. In any case, he does not, cannot trust me and I – I see no point in trying to convince him of what he is duty-bound to deny…'

Daruka did not completely understand, but then, he was a man of action, not explanation. Out loud he said, 'It's simple enough for you to destroy

him. All you have to do is…'

'…reveal his identity? Of what use would that be?'

Daruka leaned back on his heels. 'Don't you think you're taking this compassion thing too far, Commander? Unless…'

With a hoarse laugh, Govinda admitted, 'You know me well, Daruka. No, it isn't some misplaced sense of kindness that underlies this decision. My self-interest, which I claim is one with the larger interests of Aryavarta, would not benefit from such a revelation. You see, the Firstborn have thrown their might behind Syoddhan. Dwaipayana has said nothing in public, but Suka's presence at Hastina leaves no doubt. As it stands, there are rumours that the Secret Keeper and I are no longer of the same mind, but it would be another thing altogether if it became known that he considers me an enemy worth killing in cold blood. It would erode what little influence I have with Dharma Yudhisthir. Dharma would have little choice to surrender to Syoddhan, or leave Aryavarta and live in exile. Nothing would change.'

Before Daruka could argue, Govinda continued, 'I thought he was dead, Daruka – the Yavana, I mean. It's disconcerting when the past suddenly turns up to haunt us like this when the present and future are more than enough to deal with!'

'You mean, haunt you,' Daruka said. 'I take it you and he didn't get along back then?'

'No. He blamed me for bringing the bane of the Firewrights, their mistakes, to bear upon Elis. I guess he's not the only one who thinks I've done wrong by his people.'

'If there are more like him, Commander, you'd better watch your back.'

'I thought I have you for that, Captain.'

'You do now, *Govinda*. You do now. But if there should be war… who will watch your back when I'm gone? Don't depend on me too much, old friend.' With that, he turned his attention back to Govinda's wounds.

Flinching with renewed pain, Govinda said, 'It must heal before we reach Matsya, Daruka. We can't let anyone find out about this attack. The Secret Keeper aside, our friends will want to blame Syoddhan. We cannot

risk stirring anger and resentment against him at the moment. It might jeopardize my plans.’

‘I know.’

Govinda let his head fall on to his forearms again. This time though, it was not pain that he wanted to hide, but the various emotions that threatened to surface all at once.

7

BY THE TIME THE LOW STRUCTURES OF UPAPLAVYA, THE MAIN CITY of the region of Matsya, were sighted through the desert mist, Govinda had little more to show for his recent battle than some stiffness where the gash on his back had been expertly tended to by Daruka. The swelling on his face had receded but traces of a bruise remained, not enough, he hoped, to draw comment. The journey from Hastina to Upaplavya had taken them nearly twice the estimated four days, but such things were easily blamed on the weather, or some fault with the carriage – excuses typically unavailable to riders.

Alighting from the carriage at the entrance to the royal quarters, Govinda dismissed Daruka with a grateful smile. Then he made his way into the palace that had been – and still was in name – Chief Virat's, though it was Dharma Yudhisthir who sat on the Chief's throne whenever the assembly was convened. He noticed the lone grey-white feather that littered the corridor, awaiting removal by palace attendants as part of their cleaning ritual at dawn. It had clearly not been long since Dharma had received a message. There were few people in all of Aryavarta who used these grey messenger pigeons and Govinda knew instantly that the missive had come from Vidur. It was the consequent implication of the messenger's presence that interested Govinda further – few people in all of Aryavarta had enough influence over the wise courtier to make him preempt Govinda, and one alone had the immediacy.

Sukadeva Vasishta Varuni. The future Vyasa of the Firstborn.

Suka's father, the former Vyasa, Krishna Dwaipayana, had been a prominent feature of Aryavarta's politics as well as the personal history of

the Kurus. But there had been more to that history, a fact that few had known – Dwaipayana, the one destined to lead the Firstborn to their greatest heights, was born of a Firewright womb. Satyavati, the Kuru queen and Dwaipayana's mother, had been born Princess of Matsya, a land that had once been home to the Wrights.

These complex considerations had influenced Dwaipayana and, in turn, his direction of Aryavarta's moral fabric. For his part, Govinda had never hesitated to twist those strands to his own ends. Suka, however, was spun of a different thread altogether. As far as Aryavarta was concerned, Suka remained a relatively unknown entity. A tall, handsome man who bore an uncanny resemblance to his famed grandfather, but none at all to the dark, diminutive Dwaipayana, he was to be seen occasionally at rituals and yagna-sacrifices as part of the large group of scholar-priests always by Dwaipayana's side. He hardly spoke, and if at all he did it was in restrained tones that suggested a perpetual sense of being an imposition upon the moment. No one noticed him. No one bothered with him. He came and went as he wished, did as he wished, for no one stopped to think that he might wish anything at all.

The thought of Suka made Govinda stop in his tracks. He took a deep breath of the crisp morning air. He was not a man who lacked courage, but neither was he foolish enough to not know fear when it was due. The idea of having Suka for an enemy made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. *What needs be done must be done. It matters not who stands with me and who stands against me. It doesn't matter whether I succeed or fail. All that matters now…*

He pushed all thought aside as he arrived at Dharma's chambers. The solitary attendant let him in without a word, the act indicating that he was expected. Govinda entered.

Dharma Yudhisthir looked as an emperor ought to. Even in solitude, he sat proud and erect on a cushioned chair as though it were a throne. He had a clean, sharp face that was more refined than rugged, and the wrinkles that time had etched in were thoughtfully placed, as though to suggest wisdom

and kindness rather than age and exhaustion. He was reasonably tall, but lacked the broad shoulders and thick chest common to the Kurus and clearly visible in his cousin, Syoddhan, and where Syoddhan radiated energy and vigour, Dharma was the epitome of quiet certitude. *One is the perfect emperor for war, the other just what we needed in times of peace*, Govinda noted, wondering at the same time whether he had made the wrong choice decades ago. It had seemed to be the best option then, but now…

Don't, he chastised himself. *This is not about you, your decisions, your actions any more. This is far bigger than any of us. Syoddhan and Dharma are but two halves of a whole. It is that whole you question, not its parts*.

As Govinda neared the seated Dharma, the former emperor sighed and looked up. 'So…' he said. 'It appears that Syoddhan was not easily convinced, was he? And now you have no choice but to make do with me, as you did years ago when you made me Emperor.'

Govinda walked over to where a wrought iron jar filled with spiced wine was set out, along with matching goblets carved in the same intricate patterns. He poured himself some wine before sitting down in a chair made of the same metal. He took a sip from the goblet, enjoying the way the liquid slid down his throat and into his veins, warm and soothing, and said, 'Your empire was supposed to be the foundation of peace and prosperity.'

'Hah! Peace! Prosperity! You say those words like they have some magical power, the ability to set everything right. But they didn't. How could a weak empire be a peaceful empire? It was nothing more than an empire of consensus, Govinda. An empire led by a weak emperor. That is why you chose me, is it not?'

'Is that what you thought? You thought yourself weak?'

'Didn't everyone?'

'Not I, Dharma. In retrospect, I should have been more forthcoming about it. I saw strength, the power of people bound by reason, the only kind of strength that matters. I saw an emperor who would place righteousness and the interests of the people before himself.'

'Then…' Dharma let his confusion show. 'What happened to you, Govinda? All these years? And now? Things are not the same between us.

You are not the same. I know what I did was… Well, that Govinda Shauri had no thirst for blood.'

'I haven't changed, Dharma. I wanted peace then, why would I not want it now?'

'That is not what you declared at Hastina. What you said there is no rumour.'

'Then you know war was declared in your name. That implies your assent.'

'What made you think I'd go to war?' Dharma asked.

Govinda settled back against some cushions and reached out to take another long sip of his wine before saying, 'What makes you think *I'd* go to war, Dharma?'

'A feint then?'

'A feint. Syoddhan doesn't want war any more than we do; no one does. We just need to play this along till such time as we get what we want: an admission that…' he trailed off.

Dharma smiled. 'An admission that denies me the authority that I believe was rightfully mine; mine by destiny and divine will. That I may not have used it in a manner you approve of cannot change the fact that I had the right and the power to do what I did. But you would have me deny it, and you would have me opppose my kinsmen, the very people who share my beliefs.'

'Will you?' Govinda asked, his voice guttural as he threw his head back to empty the goblet.

'Why should I? Why would you want me to, if you believed what I did was wrong.'

'Because to let it stand unquestioned would be worse. You *did* exceed your authority. But that is no excuse for Syoddhan to assume your role. Aryavarta was built as an alliance of nations, an empire of freedom and free will. It is for the leaders of this alliance, the willing vassals and tributaries to decide whether you ought to remain Emperor, and if not, who ought to be Emperor in your stead. At the very least, calling the rest of Aryavarta to arms will show us what they truly think.'

‘And if the vassals are divided in their opinion? If they do not agree to support us? Already the Yadus have chosen to side with Syoddhan. Vasusena, Asvattama and their vassals are a given for him too. King Dhrupad’s allegiance to us, our spies report, is suspect, and I am inclined to agree. The very same Dhrstyadymn who rejoiced to see me take the throne of Matsya now refuses to respond to our messages, yet he gathers his forces at Kampilya. If the Panchalas stand against us, it not only questions the legitimacy of our cause but also leaves us severely outmatched in diplomatic and martial terms.’

‘That is a risk we must take. One that I shall do my best to counter. But I make no promises and would not have you believe otherwise.’

‘And that is why I say you’re a different man. Where are your reassurances, your confident assertions? Where is the man who always has a plan?’

Govinda twirled the empty goblet in his hand. His eyes remained on it as he said, ‘I told you that I saw an emperor who would place righteousness and the interests of the people before himself. By that assessment, I still stand. As for the man with a plan… He is asking his emperor to step forth and do what is needed for the people. Will you?’

‘Yes, I will.’ Dharma was resolute. He said, ‘I have made mistakes, Govinda. Just not the kind you think I did. And I want the chance to set things right, to do my duty. I failed to protect evil from itself, but I shall not make that error again. I cannot risk that my obvious love of peace becomes cause for strife. If I do not stand firm against Syoddhan, who knows what ancient horrors, what forgotten Wright weapons the various kingdoms pull out from hidden coffers, either to please or to defy him. You may think Dwaipayana Vyasa – my grandfather and the greatest ever Firstborn scholar – kept the truth of his mother’s identity hidden out of shame, but I tell you this: He kept it hidden because he knew evil had to be guarded from itself. The fact that he was born of a Firewright womb was not a blight but a weapon, and a powerful one in the hands of those who would wield it.’

‘Like your cousin Syoddhan?’ Govinda prompted.

‘Like many men who would taint his intentions with their advice,’ Dharma said. ‘Now that you have shattered the former Vyasa’s secret, who is to be the conscience-keeper of Aryavarta? Even as we speak, I am sure that Vasusena, Jayadrath, and many others search nook and cranny of the realm for the famed final creation of the Firewrights – the Naga-astra. Who can now hold them back? Certainly not the Firstborn! As for Grandsire Bhisma, Acharya Dron – these men are bound by their oaths of allegiance, the very Divine Order that Syoddhan and his cronies now threaten. They are slaves to their own nobility, and I do not hold it against them. But I…I am not beholden to Syoddhan, or to anyone else. If anyone stands against him, it must be me.’

‘I understand, Dharma.’

‘Be sure that you do, Govinda. I will agree with what you say, for the present, because I see the reasoning behind what you propose. Remember though that even the best of intentions can’t be without limitations. We will follow your plan, for as long as we can. But the one thing we shall not do is go to war.’

Govinda stood up and carefully stretched his arms above his head, at the same time stifling a yawn. ‘Don’t worry. We won’t. It is only in street corner plays and bards’ songs that wars are fought on battlefields as soon as they are declared. In reality, it takes a long time to prepare for them. Much happens before that, and that is often a war in its own right.’

‘What do you mean?’’

‘Wars cost money, Dharma. Wars take soldiers, weapons, horses and various other arrangements that you are only too familiar with. But what you might not know, given your royal birth, is that eventually men, money and materials, all come not from the royal palaces, but from among common citizens, the men and women who truly make up this realm, though they have no say in any of its matters. At the end of the day, though it may be Syoddhan Kauravya and Dharma Yudhisthir who meet each other in battle, the real war will be fought throughout the fifty-odd nations of Aryavarta. Taxes, rains and harvests, coffers that have been emptied or filled, old enmities and new ambitions…there are many, many things that

will determine how things play out. No, Dharma, open war is a long way off, and I have no intention of letting things come to that.'

'You finally sound more like yourself, Govinda,' said Dharma. 'But how can you be so sure? How can you be sure that there remains room for bargain?'

'Because that is how the system of vassal allegiance works. I believe it is called Divine Order.' Before Dharma could respond to the obvious sarcasm, Govinda was striding towards the door. He called out over his shoulder, 'Now sleep, you look like you need it.'

Dharma's response was a motionless silence that could have meant acquiescence. Govinda, however, had no doubt that his last advice would go unheeded.

8

‘OH-OH!’ ABHIMANYU YELPED AND JUMPED BACK AS A HARD ELBOW dug into the side of his stomach. He could not see his attacker’s face clearly in the dim light of the wick lamp, but then he did not have to. ‘What was that for?’ he hissed, his eyes gradually getting used to the near darkness of the tunnel he was in after the brightness of the room he had been peeking into through a spy-hole.

‘That,’ Uttara Vairati replied, ‘was for not keeping your bony knee to yourself!’

Abhimanyu thought to argue about how it was her fault for not letting him peer through the peephole at what was going on in Dharma Yudhisthir’s room, but he decided on another ploy. ‘How do you know,’ he teased, ‘that it was my knee that you felt?’ He let the implications hang in the air, relishing what he imagined was a look of disgust on Uttara’s face.

‘You’d better hope it was, because this would hurt a lot more… elsewhere.’ She landed a hard kick with the heel of her foot on Abhimanyu’s left knee, making him yell as his leg buckled under.

‘Why you…’ He grabbed out, trying to remain standing by holding on to her, but was successful only in making her lose her balance.

‘The lamp! The lamp!’ Uttara warned as they both toppled over, but it was too late. The small wick lamp, chosen over a more resilient torch for its discreet light, hit the ground and immediately went out.

‘Oh, well done!’ Abhimanyu complained before Uttara could turn on him. She ignored him and began to feel her way to the wall to her right. ‘Stay as you are,’ she instructed. ‘If we can figure out which wall the

keyhole was on, then we can align ourselves and feel our way back to the entrance. The passage is narrow, so we can…'

Her hand landed on the bare skin of Abhimanyu's taut abdomen, and he groaned with pretended excitement. 'Oh, don't stop!' he added for effect.

Uttara pulled her hand back, muttering indistinct words about slapping his face if only she could find it in the dark.

'You're rolling your eyes at me, aren't you? I know you're rolling your eyes!' Abhimanyu baited her, knowing full well she had little patience with what she considered excessive and dramatic displays of emotion.

'Vathu! Shut up!' Uttara finally said, and returned to the task of feeling around, a little more cautiously, for the wall that had been in front of her. Despite her instructions to the contrary, Abhimanyu stood up and she could feel the warm skin of his arm brush hers as he did so. This time, Uttara did not complain. She knew Abhimanyu's touch had not been intentional.

Both she and Abhimanyu had submitted to their marriage to each other given the political importance of the alliance it forged between the Confederacy of Matsya and the Kingdom of Western Kuru, to the extent that the exiled Emperor Dharma Yudhisthir could still be called king. Also, the wedding had been an important element of Govinda Shauri's plans to reestablish Dharma as Emperor of Aryavarta, or so Panchali had explained. Uttara had agreed, but not without anger, and certainly not without condition. As far as the world, the political audience for whose benefit this arrangement had been proposed, would know, she and Abhimanyu would appear blissfully wedded. But between them, there would be nothing, not even friendship or civility. And so the young couple endured each other's company in public with smiling faces, all the while exchanging jibes under their breath and letting out sighs of relief when the ceremonies were over.

Despite the understanding between them, Uttara had arrived in her rooms on their wedding night to find Abhimanyu there. She had been livid and far from restrained in her response to him.

In response, for the first and last time in the months that she had known him, Abhimanyu had also shown open rage. 'You think I wanted this? You think I like this? Did you ever bother, Princess, to consider that I too had

plans for my life, that maybe I loved another woman and wanted to marry her? By Rudra! I thought you were a different kind of person, but you… you're just another self-obsessed, spoilt royal brat!'

Uttara had hoped that the dispute would be enough to make him leave her rooms, but was shocked as he had proceeded to make himself comfortable on her bed. 'What? Did you want this side?' he had asked when she had glared at him, but then had turned over and gone to sleep without waiting for her answer.

The next morning, to Uttara's amazement, Abhimanyu had apologized for his choice of words to her, but not his actions. She had felt compelled to reciprocate in kind. After that the two of them had tried to meet as little as possible and to altogether avoid speaking to each other. It had taken the fiery couple only a week to their next argument, after which both of them realized that it was easier to maintain snide interactions than it was to not acknowledge each other at all. Thus, a new routine had set in, which had turned out to be not at all unpleasant. Whatever graces Abhimanyu may or may not have had, Uttara had to admit that he did not lack humour and, despite his constant complaint that Uttara was unduly opinionated, Abhimanyu found her to be a most sporting companion, who could hold her own against him in every way. Still, their relationship was far from amiable and, standing close together in the tunnel, Uttara wondered – as she suspected Abhimanyu did too – whether outright hostility had not been preferable. One of the advantages of anger, she realized in retrospect, was that it had blinded her to the fact that Abhimanyu was an exceptionally attractive man.

Abhimanyu lacked the burly frame of both the Kuru and Yadu clans, and took his height and build from his maternal uncle Govinda. His features, however, were his mother Subadra's. He had her golden skin, her large doe eyes fringed with long lashes and, Uttara suspected, he had also had Subadra's rounded face till manhood had chiselled his jaw into strong, determined lines. A child of the turbulent times his family had faced, Abhimanyu had been relentlessly trained by Govinda and his son Pradymna, and had a strong body to show for it.

It was not, Uttara reasoned with herself, that she had not encountered handsome men before, nor had they failed to tell her what she already knew – that she was not lacking in beauty. But there was an allure about Abhimanyu that stirred her attention, and she knew that he felt the same way about her. She had seen him struggle with himself, caught between discretion and brazenness when he looked at her. A part of him also struggled with the seeming redundancy of finding her attractive, given their animosity towards each other. Yet, when she and Abhimanyu were together in public, it was not too difficult to regard each other with what onlookers would interpret as affection and desire.

To all impressions, the two of them made the perfect pair. If it were not for the circumstances of their wedding, Uttara suspected, she and Abhimanyu could have been friends. In fact, she noted, they were friends enough to have decided to eavesdrop on Dharma and Govinda's conversation by means of the secret passages in Chief Virat's palace, all of which she knew like the back of her hand.

'What's the matter? Can't find another excuse to get your hands on me?' Abhimanyu said.

Immediately, Uttara regretted the instant of goodwill she had felt. Glaring at him, though the action was wasted in the dark, she said, 'This way.' She began walking towards the doorway to the tunnel, hands on the walls on either side for a sense of direction. She did not stop to check, but knew Abhimanyu was behind her.

'We're going in the wrong direction,' he said after some time. 'We didn't walk for so long when we came in…Oh!' The exclamation came as he walked right into a stationary Uttara. The force propelled them both into the wall ahead, Uttara having the presence of mind to brace herself with her hands instead of being driven into the wall. Breathing hard, for more reasons than the close call, the two stood in the darkness.

And then, Abhimanyu whispered, 'Uttara…'

His throaty voice sent a shiver through her. Afraid that she might just give in to the sensations she felt at that moment, Uttara began to frantically

run her hands over the stone that blocked their way, searching for the small catch that would release the door set into it.

‘Uttara, I…’ Abhimanyu bent down to take in the smell of her hair, grazing her neck with his chin. Closing her eyes, Uttara began to lean back into his chest. She tried hard to think of the numerous matters of importance in the world outside, the impending war – or not – among them, but right then politics seemed a distraction. Everything seemed a distraction except Abhimanyu, except the feeling of being held by him, against him. Her hands retreated from the stone; she meant to sink them into Abhimanyu’s thick hair, but at the last instant her right hand grazed against the door catch and her finger hooked around the small mechanism. Abhimanyu pulled her gently to him. Before she could let go of the catch, it gave with a click and the stone door slid open.

9

UTTARA DID NOT KNOW WHAT EMBARRASSED HER MORE – THE fact that she had nearly given in to her attraction for Abhimanyu, or that she had done so in front of a familiar but nonetheless amused audience. Panchali and all four of Dharma's brothers – Bhim, Partha, Nakul and Sadev – were looking at her and Abhimanyu in gleeful surprise. In Uttara's typical fashion, though, what irked her the most was her fundamental error in thinking that the room they had used to enter the secret passage would remain unoccupied till they came out. She did the only thing she could think of to deflect their attention or any comments they might be inclined to make. Springing out from the corridor as though it was the most natural way of entering a room, she said, 'He's back. Commander Govinda is back. He has already met with Emperor Dharma. He…'

Uttara stopped short as she realized that the only thing that could embarrass her more had come to pass. Govinda Shauri stood, unnoticed, leaning against the doorway. In a manner that immediately explained where Abhimanyu had acquired the traits that irritated her, he teased, 'You're remarkably well informed, Princess.'

'Father…err…Uncle…' Abhimanyu greeted Govinda, his usual confusion at not knowing how to address his elder drawing a warm smile from the others.

Govinda studied him briefly, his emotions inscrutable, but then turned away to address Panchali with unmistakable warmth, 'Yes, I met Dharma Yudhisthir. I'd expected you to be there, Empress.'

'You're hurt,' she responded.

‘It’s nothing,’ Govinda said, pleased that she had noticed. He had not thought she had looked at him when he entered, though he could never hold back from looking at her.

Meanwhile, Uttara had regained her composure, having taken advantage of the moment to close the entrance to the secret passage, but Abhimanyu was doing his best to avoid everyone’s eyes, especially his father, Partha’s. Stifling her laughter at their actions, Panchali turned to Govinda and said, ‘We all thought it best that you and Dharma have a conversation alone. It went well?’

‘It did. We need to start sending our emissaries out at once, see who is willing to ally with us. And that,’ Govinda turned to Uttara and Abhimanyu, ‘brings us to you. I have a task for you two, one that I cannot entrust to anyone else…’

‘Of course!’ Abhimanyu was eager. ‘What would you have me do?’

‘I can’t tell you yet, Abhimanyu. It’s a secret.’

It was only an instant of hesitation as Abhimanyu looked from Govinda to Partha and the others, wondering what it was that Govinda would not speak of in front of them all, but it was enough for Uttara. ‘Let him be, Commander,’ she said, disdainful. ‘I will see it done. Unlike someone here, I lack neither courage nor trust…’ She threw every bit of venom she could muster into the words, desperately trying to redeem herself of the attraction she had felt a short while ago. It helped, for Abhimanyu’s eyes narrowed and settled into a cold glare.

Govinda looked at Panchali, hoping for some indication as to what he ought to do next. She shook her head, a sign that he should wait. He did. At length, Abhimanyu said, ‘I will go. You know I will, and you know I’ll do as you say. But this woman…’

‘…is coming with you.’ Partha spoke, his tone indicating that he would have no argument.

‘What!’

‘Why not?’ Uttara countered.

‘Father, you can’t…’

‘Commander, you know I…’

‘…be serious about…’

‘…would never question…’

The others began laughing, forcing the young couple into a simmering sulk. After a while, Govinda cleared his throat and explained, ‘I can’t have your absence questioned, nor would it help for everyone to know where you have gone. And so we are going to announce that you two newlywed lovebirds plan to spend some time together, visiting various temples and places of pilgrimage while preparations are made for war.’

‘That sounds silly,’ Uttara complained.

‘I agree,’ Abhimanyu said. ‘Who in their right minds would go off on a jaunt while there’s a war in the offing?’

Eyes twinkling, Govinda said, ‘Love makes us all do silly things, Abhimanyu. Besides, it provides us with decent excuses to do so.’ In a more serious tone, he added, ‘It’s not just the two of you who shall be off on a jaunt. Nakul, Sadev, I need you to go see your uncle, Shalya of Madra. I too will need to make some diplomatic visits of my own.’

‘Are we mustering forces?’ Bhim asked.

‘We are,’ Govinda replied. ‘You can be sure Syoddhan has already done the same. Except…’

‘Hmm?’

‘Sooner or later, he will be pushed to war. As will we. You can’t kindle a fire and then expect it not to burn. The more we prepare for war, the more we make it a reality. Yet, it would seem, to prepare for war may also be the best and possibly the only way to avoid it.’

Partha asked, ‘Do you mean to avoid it, Govinda?’

‘Should I, Partha? Do you think your brother’s right to rule this Empire is worth the bloodshed? What about you, Bhim? How many lives are too many, against your need for vengeance?’ Govinda waved the statements away, while Bhim and Partha stared, lost for words. ‘Never mind. There are no sane answers to such questions. Now, I’m starving. Who’s ready for the morning meal?’ Without waiting for an answer, he wrapped an arm each around Uttara and Abhimanyu and led them out of the room.

Once they were gone, even the usually recalcitrant Nakul was driven to words. ‘I don’t get it,’ he said. ‘If the intent is only to get Syoddhan to think we want to attack, so as to force him to make peace with us…I’m not sure the kind of muster Govinda has in mind gives that impression. I mean, sending us to meet Uncle Shalya is an obvious step, but what he wants those two young ones to do… Who does he want them to meet?’

‘I don’t know,’ Bhim said. ‘If you ask me, Govinda is being defensive. Maybe he thinks war is inevitable.’

Partha said, ‘You heard him…To prepare for war only enhances the possibility of it.’

‘It is also the only means towards peace,’ Bhim pointed out. ‘No one wants to fight a war they cannot win. All we need to do is show Syoddhan that this war is not in his interests. Remember how we built the Empire? We just had to get the right kingdoms to swear their allegiance to us, and the rest fell into order of their own accord. It’s no different now.’

‘Unless,’ Sadev added, ‘there is more to it?’

‘Of course there’s more to it,’ Panchali said. She stood up and casually settled her pleated robes into place as she spoke. ‘I’m surprised that you can’t see the obvious, Sadev. What would a man like Govinda Shauri value above all?’

Sadev shook his head, ‘I can’t say, Panchali. Who in Yama’s name can be sure what Govinda wants?’

Panchali did not reply, relishing what was at once the quiet comfort and the unbearably heavy burden of understanding Govinda Shauri. She was vaguely aware that the conversation continued till for lack of finality it was abandoned. A voice – she thought it was Bhim – called out to her a couple of times, but she remained as she was, gazing sightlessly into the distance.

The room emptied. Panchali realized she had been holding her breath, though she did not know why. She let it out in a rush, a tired sigh escaping with it before she could control herself. Not wanting to be alone for another instant, she made her way back to the room she shared with her husband, Dharma Yudhisthir, to get ready for the day ahead.

10

SUDAKSHIN THE SECOND, KING OF KASHI, RULED FROM A CAPITAL that was new and spectacular. That in itself would have made most men in his position happy, but not Sudakshin. The young king found the brightness of the walls oppressive and the gleam of the polished floors blinding; the freshness of it all filled him with disgust. He felt immensely comfortable in the deep lower levels and darks corners that had escaped renovation, though these bowers held no trace of the past, or what had been there before. All that remained was burnt rubble and soot-stain, traces of that which had destroyed the past. It was enough for Sudakshin, for what he nurtured in his heart was not nostalgia; it was hatred. For the moment, he found satisfaction in taking it out on the man before him. Wrapping his strong fingers around the kneeling messenger's neck, he squeezed with all his rage, feeling his bitterness soothed by the gagging noises that left the victim's throat.

The demonstration both pleased and astounded his visitor. Devala Asita's eyes sparkled with obvious delight as he said, 'I thought he was your man?'

'He was,' Sudakshin replied, not bothering to add the obvious: that the news the messenger had brought him had not been to his liking. He turned to the commandant of his personal guard, the only other living man in the dungeon-like room besides himself and the Firewright, and ordered, 'Go, see if he was telling the truth. And if he was…'

'Don't be hasty,' Devala cut in. 'This is not the time for whatever squabbles you may have with your mother. Syoddhan offers you a chance for vengeance against those who killed your father and burnt down your city. After all these years, don't lose it over small matters.'

‘Small matters? You call my mother spreading her legs for the man who killed my father a small matter? Then what would be a *big* matter, Firewright?’

‘Ruining Syoddhan Kauravya’s plans by killing a petty spy would be a big matter. It would not only warn Dharma Yudhisthir and his allies that we know what they are up to, but also…’

Sudakshin turned on Devala. ‘And what plan is it that you want me to whore out my mother for…Acharya?’ He added the honorific with reluctance, but did not dare insult the man; especially not after he knew the great heights to which Devala had nearly raised his father, Sudakshin the First.

‘The plan of getting Dharma to think that you and your considerable might will be at his disposal. By the time he realizes you mean to ally with Syoddhan, it will be too late for him to do anything but surrender. Your father understood the importance of discretion, Sudakshin. Unfortunately, he let his fondness for a woman, and I say fondness advisedly, blind him. Don’t make the same mistake.’

Sudakshin bit his lip, fighting the urge to retort. *Women*, he seethed with contempt, thinking of the cause of his father’s downfall. *Always women. First that Kritya, and now my own mother… Traitors all! But she is my mother…* Out loud, he said, ‘I want confirmation. I want to know. You, what are you waiting for?’ He addressed the last words again to his commandant. The man left with a deep bow and a look in his eyes that Devala recognized as long-held lust, but Sudakshin did not. Devala thought to warn the young king, to tell him that his commandant was not a man to be trusted – not fully. Then he decided against it. Whether in peace, or in war, he doubted that Sudakshin or his commandant would live long.

His task done, Devala took his leave of Sudakshin. As he rode out of the city, he could not help but glance back at the palace, wondering which of its many sparkling lights came from the Queen’s room, and what was, in fact, going on there.

It was whispered, in frightened rather than amused tones, that no one in Kashi was ever happy to answer a knock at their door and find the King's commandant standing there, not even the commandant's own wife. The young handmaiden attending on the Queen was no exception. She lowered her eyes in a futile bid to avoid attention, but nevertheless felt the commandant's lecherous gaze sweep over her. With a sigh she resigned herself to the inevitable summons to his bed that she knew she would soon receive. Before that, though, was the matter at hand, undoubtedly more urgent and infinitely more important to them all.

'I wish to see the Queen,' the commandant declared, expecting to be let in.

The handmaiden, mustering her love for her mistress as courage, blocked the doorway with her slender frame. 'Her Highness is not in a position to receive you, my lord,' she said.

'I insist on knowing why.'

'S…surely, Her Highness is not answerable to the commandant?'

'No, but a handmaiden is.' The commandant stepped forward, menacing. 'Do you need me to teach you your place? I assure you, I'd enjoy doing so…'

'My lord, I merely say what I have been ordered to.'

'And I order you now to tell me why the Queen cannot see me. Failing which, I have no choice but to force my way past you… For all we know, the Queen could be in danger while you and I discuss proprieties.'

'My lord, I…'

'Get out of my way, girl!'

Speechless and tearful, the terrified handmaiden hung on to the door as though her life depended on it.

Her pitiful stance did nothing to deter the commandant. 'Arrest her,' he instructed the soldiers with him.

The men moved, the young woman screamed, and sounds of a scuffle emerged from further inside the Queen's room.

'What the…' the commandant cried out and, pushing aside the handmaiden, barged into the room.

He had hardly set foot inside when an imperious voice ordered, ‘Stop! Tell your men to get away from that girl this instant!’

‘Your Highness…’ the commandant prepared to argue, but fell speechless as his breath caught in his throat.

The Queen was an attractive woman, all the more so for the single length of cloth she held up to cover her obvious nudity. The commandant felt the intoxicating mix of awe and desire swarm his brain, a sensation quite different from the entitled lust that he exercised with every other woman in the kingdom, barring Sudakshin’s chosen concubines. *If, however, the Queen were found guilty of treason….*

‘Well?’ the Queen interrupted his pleasant imaginations. ‘You wanted to know why I could not see you, commandant. I trust that question has been answered?’

Some of the accompanying guards shifted uncomfortably, but the commandant remained resolute. ‘Forgive me, Mahamatra. But an intruder has been sighted within the palace.’

‘Are you suggesting, commandant, that this intruder is here? In my rooms? While I am…in this state?’

‘Mahamatra, there is no doubt he…that is…he was seen…’

The Queen raised a slender finger, silencing him. She then said, ‘Think very carefully before you speak another word. Remember that whatever you say next, you will repeat in front of my son when you report this matter to him, as you must. Is it your intent to tell him that his mother, the Queen Mother of Kashi…?’

The recent demonstration of Sudakshin’s rage was fresh in the commandant’s memory and flickered as uncertainty in his eyes. He cleared his throat in a prelude to an argument, but finding nothing further to say, he waved his men out of the room. Then he bowed and strode out the way he had come, taking his time in an effort to emphasize his diminished presence. The handmaiden remained motionless, relieved that she had been forgotten for the present. She waited till the sound of the soldiers’ retreating footsteps had faded into the distance before running to close the door and bolt it shut.

The Queen sighed and let her shoulders slack. The cloth she had been holding dropped to the floor. The handmaiden was weeping with fright, a sight which filled the Queen with displeasure, not for the poor girl but for the man who had placed them in this position. She turned around to face the tall figure seated in a chair, one leg crossed and resting on the other knee. ‘How stupid can you get? Muhira!’ she said. ‘If he’d taken just one more step forward, the commandant would have seen you!’

A deep voice replied. ‘I doubt that very much, Mahamatra. I’d say you had his complete attention.’

11

THERE WERE, THE QUEEN OF KASHI KNEW, MANY EPITHETS ONE could use for the man who sat before her. Once he had been called the Conqueror of Kashi, but in her son's reign he was simply 'The butcher' or 'The man who burnt down Kashi.' To her he would always remain the man who had never asked her her name despite all the time they had spent together decades ago. It was, she had finally understood, a sign that there were certain boundaries in their relationship that he would not cross, not even if she invited him to. When he had left, his task done, he had not looked back. Until today.

The Queen knew he was here for a cause, and to entertain him or the cause was tantamount to treason against her son, the King. She studied the still-weeping handmaiden, well aware of what it was the girl continued to fear as inevitable. She made up her mind as to what to do next as she consoled the girl and dismissed her off to her bed. She turned to the visitor, giving voice to the mild anger she felt towards him.

'Really,' she chided him, 'would it have killed you to hide?'

He replied, 'Would it have killed you to keep your clothes on? I refused to sneak off behind drapes and cower under tables; you think there's any honour in hiding behind…'

'A woman?' the Queen prompted.

'A naked woman. If you'd held the commandant off with a sword, I'd have been proud to be so protected.'

The Queen faltered, taken aback by the statement. She thought for a moment and then shook her head. 'I didn't know what else to do. I was terrified that if you were caught you'd be… Damn you to the fires of Patala, Shikandin. Just when I find a good reason to be angry with you, you say

something that reminds me why I didn't kill you in the first place.' Smiling, she added, 'It's good to see you again.'

'Its good to see you too, Mahamatra.' Shikandin smiled, the age-drawn lines at the edges of his eyes deepening in a way that the queen found attractive. 'Now, if you could please put your clothes back on? I'm trying hard to be a decent man here, but I am just a man…' he jested.

'As if you could be anything but decent.'

'I suppose it is a fit punishment that you keep reminding me of the opportunity I lost.'

'No, Shikandin. It is not fair on my part, though I admit it is amusing. What you did then, your refusal to have your way with me though you stood as the conqueror of Kashi…'

'I suppose that was when you fell in love with me?' Shikandin teased her yet again.

The Queen laughed, throwing her hands up to admit defeat in the friendly debate. Then she began to get dressed. The moment for levity had passed. Settling her clothes in place, she turned again to Shikandin. 'What now? Sudakshin won't change his mind. He means to ally our considerable armies with Syoddhan. And we both know that it's not the numbers alone that matter, but equally the message it sends through the realm. By law, Sudakshin swore his allegiance to Dharma Yudhisthir.'

'And many would claim that by law the allegiance passed from Dharma to Syoddhan when the empire was lost. But that is not what this war is about. It is not about lost empires and shattered egos.'

'Then? Why are you here, Shikandin? You know already that your visit is in vain as far as getting my son to ally with Dharma Yudhisthir goes. In fact, sooner or later, rumours of your visit will force Sudakshin to declare his support for Syoddhan, whether Syoddhan asks for it or not. Or…' she tapered off into thought. 'Is that what you want?'

Shikandin avoided the direct question. He said, 'This is not about what I want, Mahamatra. You know I am but an instrument; I act on another's behalf.'

‘But to what end? No one understands Panchali’s grief and outrage more than I. I do not claim to have suffered as she does, but to present myself before you the day my husband died, dressed as a bride… I can’t ever forget what I felt. I remain angry with the world we live in for putting me in that position. I suppose if I could, I too would want war to be avenged, but…’

Shikandin was visibly taken aback. ‘You think this war is about the vengeance of a woman wronged? Yes, that may well be what it will go down as in history and lore. But it is more than that. I know it is, but I don’t have the words to explain.’

‘You don’t have to explain. I understand it, as do a number of the people of Kashi, including our vassal lords. Noble though it may be, our way of life is nothing but servitude. It does not take long for servitude to turn to subjugation. Dharma Yudhisthir’s actions have established precisely that.’

‘So you stand with Dharma Yudhisthir? Though your son does not?’

‘I stand with the people of Kashi. Though, I suppose, you find such words empty when they come from privileged lips?’

‘Privileged, yes, but beautiful, too. Seriously, who am I to judge your sincerity, my queen? After all, I am just one more of these oppressive royals, part of this system that treats the people as nothing more than property. Besides…’ he added, as he saw the Queen prepare to argue further, ‘all this talk of war is premature. These preparations are nothing more than posturing.’

The Queen did not miss the disapproval in Shikandin’s voice. ‘You’re not happy with that. You’d rather fight, wouldn’t you?’

Shikandin considered her words briefly, as though the thought had not occurred to him before. ‘Yes. You’re right, I’d rather fight. Not because I don’t like or don’t want peace. And not because Panchali is my sister. Not even for Govinda Shauri. There’s someone else, someone whose rebellion – and I say rebellion and not vengeance for a reason –has been a long time coming. There is someone else I must fight for, before the end. She…she was from Kashi, too.’

‘Who?’

‘Never mind. Enough of all this talk of battle and politics. Have you got any better at playing tigers and lambs since we last met?’ Shikandin pointed to the ornate game tile and coins that sat, disused, on a small table.

The Queen said, ‘Hah! You’re the one who needed to improve. A child who plays with cowrie shells and lines drawn in the sand could beat you!’

The rest of the night passed in easy conversation and light-hearted play. A little before dawn, Shikandin stood up and stretched. ‘Send for your handmaiden,’ he told the Queen. ‘I’ll see her to safety. Sooner or later the commandant will take his anger with you out on her, and she won’t survive it. She’d be better off going back to wherever it is she came from.’

The Queen said, ‘Her village is somewhere near the border,’ she said, making her way into the antechamber where her attendants slept. She emerged with the girl in tow. ‘Go with him,’ she commanded. The handmaiden shrank away, frightened.

Shikandin reached out in an attempt to placate her, but she hid behind her mistress, whimpering like a child.

‘Where are you from?’ Shikandin asked her.

‘Answer him!’ the Queen instructed. The handmaiden mumbled the name of a village that Shikandin recognized as being on the fringes of the Eastern Forest.

‘I know that place,’ he told her. ‘I’ve been there.’

Confusion and curiosity finally made the girl stop crying. She looked up at Shikandin, daring to meet his eyes. He reached out to take her hand in his and said, ‘I swear to you on Amba’s memory, I will see you safely home.’ The girl gasped, as did the Queen, at the mention of the name. And then she stepped out from behind the Queen.

‘Meet me at the entrance to the royal gardens,’ Shikandin instructed her. My horse is there. Go!’

With a grateful but timid smile at her mistress, the girl left.

‘Farewell, Mahamatra,’ was all Shikandin said before he slipped silently over the palace walls to disappear into the darkness.

Just like some illicit lover, the Queen noted as she watched him go, wondering if the sadness she felt at his departure was simply regret that he

had never become one.

12

THE HANDMAIDEN WOKE UP WITH A START AT THE TOUCH ON her arm but then relaxed as she found herself looking at a familiar face…Or was it? The man was undoubtedly Shikandin, except that Shikandin seemed to have grown younger overnight. Her confusion increased as he asked her, ‘Are you alone? Are you all right?’

She sat up with a squeal, trying to push the man away. He staggered back. Taking advantage of the moment, she scrambled to her feet but realized as she made to run that she had no idea where she was. All she remembered was the three days of riding through forests, most of the time with Shikandin walking alongside, leading the horse. They had taken care to avoid villages and roadways and had not seen another living person during the entire journey. The girl had been amazed by Shikandin’s ability to negotiate the woods, whether it was to hide or to find food, and had also gradually realized that he was doing all he could to make her feel safe and comfortable.

They had hardly spoken. Once, he had asked her if she was all right, and another time she had enquired, ‘Amba… You swore on her you’d keep me safe. What is she to you?’

In response, Shikandin had pulled a string of immaculately wrought beads out from under his tunic and held them up for her to see. The beads had shone as fire by the light of the sun, the lotus-shaped engravings blooming to life as flowers that would never fade. ‘I…I don’t understand,’ the handmaiden had confessed. ‘My people, the forest-dwellers, worship Amba. Are you…?’

‘I am one of your people,’ had been the reply.

The statement had given rise to more questions. She knew that Shikandin was a prince of Panchala, and did not see what his connection to Kashi or to the people of the Eastern Forest could be. But as the day progressed, she had grown too tired for thought. She hardly remembered when they stopped to make camp or when she had lain down on the ground and instantly fallen asleep.

That had been last night and she must have, she realized, slept long, for the sun was now edging overhead towards noon. Shikandin and his horse were nowhere to be seen.

‘I won’t hurt you…Please don’t be afraid.’ The young man tried to approach her again.

This time she was bolder. ‘Don’t you know me?’ she blurted out, causing the man to look as confused as she felt. ‘Shikandin, it’s me…’ she persisted.

The words apparently made some sense to the man, for he laughed and said, ‘Being mistaken for Shikandin Draupada is probably the best compliment I get. It has happened once or twice before, but I never tire of it.’

‘But…’

Her words were cut off by the metallic ring of a sword being drawn from its scabbard. She jumped, thought to move away, but found herself stunned by the scene before her. The young man had spun around at whiplash speed, pulling his sword out in the same move. The blade now hovered but a finger’s breadth away from the older – and undoubtedly original – Shikandin’s neck. Shikandin himself stood watching, his horse by his side. It amazed the handmaiden that she had heard neither of them approach and the younger man had, but the sentiment was lost as the situation became clear. ‘Don’t hurt him!’ she shouted at the young man, before she could stop herself.

The man dropped his sword and sheathed it, a grin wrinkling the corners of his mouth. ‘I’ll try not to,’ he jested even as he was pulled into a single-handed embrace by Shikandin, who looked just as delighted. He then turned

to pat the horse's flank, adding, by way of explanation, 'Besides, my father could take on ten of me any day!'

'Your father?' she looked from one man to the other, finally comprehending as she noticed the green-brown eyes and the sculpted nose that both men had.

'Yes,' Shikandin affirmed. 'This handsome rogue is indeed my son. Uttamaujas.'

'Father!'

Shikandin turned around at the shout to see his youngest son, Kshatradharman run to him. Despite his height, the boy was only nine years old; young enough to throw his arms around his father's neck. Shikandin lifted the boy up and whirled him around before setting him down next to his brother. 'Where's your uncle?'

'He's become a slow, old fool,' a gruff voice answered. A hardy man, a forest-dwelling tribal by his aspect, emerged from the forest. He used his spear for support as he walked, and his left leg had an obvious limp.

'When did that happen, Sthuna?' Shikandin asked, concerned.

'A lot has happened in these past months, Shikhandin. But first, who is this young lady? Where did you find her?'

Shikandin quickly explained the handmaiden's situation to the others. Sthuna listened, sombre. Then he said, 'She's fortunate. She has a village to go back to. Many others don't. The attacks on our people have increased. Some come to search for the Naga-astra and leave bloody trails in their wake. Others take our men and women, the children, too, to work in their forges. The very forges you once destroyed. But what's the point! It's the same old thing all over again. Devala Asita and his false promises of power. It is we who pay the price!'

'Then, it is we who must fight against such tyranny. Have you been able to muster soldiers?'

'Men, yes,' Sthuna said. 'Soldiers, no… But they are brave and strong and all we have, really. But I must say this: They fight for you, Shikandin, not for some emperor. They will come because you have told them to. The

forest realms, from the woods of Panchala to Kosala and Kashi, are with you. But I hope you know what you are doing.'

Shikandin shook his head. 'In that case, they need not come. Enough, Sthuna. No more fighting for this leader or that, for this king or that. Tell them to come only if they wish to fight for themselves. Be very clear about that!'

'Really, Shikandin, do you think they understand the difference? Do you think *she* understands?' Sthuna gestured, not unkindly, to the handmaiden. 'She follows you because she was told to. Words like "Divine Order" have very a simple meaning for her. Obey or die! All she knows is that she was born to serve, to serve and yield, and to defy that destiny is forbidden. It is all that each one of us knows! We don't have your Arya notions of honour and self-worth – not because we lack those qualities but simply because we are denied that grace. How then do you expect me to explain to the men that they must fight for themselves; for a sense of right and freedom that I do not know how to explain?'

'The honour you speak of, Sthuna, is nothing more than a fetter; another way of saying "obey or die". By that honour, I'd have spent my life hunting down the people of the Eastern Forests – *my* people – not helping to hide and save them from my father's men. True honour is not something that is given to us; it exists within us. Tell the men to trust in themselves.'

Sthuna persisted, 'Our men fight for you, because you call them. It is you they trust. Stone and Tree save me, *you* might as well be our Emperor.'

'Uncle…' Uttamaujas placed a hand on Sthuna's shoulder, calming him down as a matter of habit. A strained quiet fell on the glade, marred only by Kshatradharman's restless shuffling as he watched the adults, uncomfortable.

It was the handmaiden who spoke. 'I followed him because he promised me freedom and safety. Because he told me that I had a choice other than to submit to whatever I was commanded to do. It is true, it took me a while to understand what that meant – when my Queen first told me to go with him I just thought it was…for his pleasure…a pleasure that I was duty-bound to provide. But I was wrong,' she said, not daring to look at Shikandin. 'It is

true, I don’t fully understand what my forest-brother here is talking about,’ she said, smiling at Sthuna, ‘and I don’t know if that is the difference he speaks of. But this is why I followed Sh…Shikandin. Not because I had to, but because I chose to.’

Shikandin laid a hand on the girl’s head. ‘You’re a brave one, you know that?’ he said. He turned to Sthuna. ‘Give our people the choice. The decision is theirs. If they agree, lead them to Matsya. But first I need you to take this young lady home.’

Uttamaujas said, ‘I can take her home. I’ll find my way to Matsya on my own after that. Uncle Sthuna need not bother.’

The offer was innocent enough, but neither Shikandin nor Sthuna missed the eagerness in the younger man’s voice. The handmaiden too noticed, for she protested, though quite ineffectually.

‘No, Uttamaujas,’ Shikandin finally said. ‘I need you to come with me. You must meet the others; you must train. There is a lot for you to do at Matsya.’

‘Oh…’ Uttamaujas did not dissent, but was visibly crestfallen.

‘Right, we better get moving,’ Sthuna said. He added, sullen, ‘I will meet you at Matsya, Shikandin, but I make no promises of the numbers I will bring with me. Too much hope would not be wise. I will do as you ask, but…’ he shook his head and then would say no more.

‘Thank you,’ the handmaiden said, turning to Shikandin. ‘I can’t tell you how grateful I am. If you are in these parts again, please do come by my village.’ She trailed off as she realized how commonplace and hackneyed that sounded, but could not resist turning to Uttamaujas and adding, ‘You too. I…that is, we…my family would be happy to see you.’

A flustered Uttamaujas simply nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and Sthuna and his new ward set off on their way.

‘Right. Our turn,’ Shikandin said. ‘We need to buy horses for you two and then head…Uttamaujas, are you listening to me?’

‘Oh! Yes, Father,’ said the young man, though he clearly was not. He absently continued, ‘I suppose it would be nice to visit her village someday…’

Shikandin smiled and slapped his son on the back. He did not dwell too long on the thought that neither he nor Uttamaujas might return to these lands or see the people who lived there again.

13

THERE WAS A QUALITY TO THE JUNGLE, ABHIMANYU OBSERVED, that made his company more bearable to Uttara.

For the past ten days, the two of them had trekked through the woods on foot, leaving their accompanying attendants and guards at the hermitage near Kamyaka, where, ostensibly, the couple was offering prayers for a long and happy married life under the guidance of Acharya Dhaumya. In truth, the two had used the cover of the forests to journey eastward, through Surasena, right to the enemy's stronghold.

Crossing the border into Western Kuru and then journeying southeast to Varana forest, near Hastina, had been the most dangerous part. It had taken up a fair part of their time, for it had been imperative they avoid being seen by anyone, especially the enemy soldiers who patrolled the forests in these troubled times. Strangely, this part of their journey had been far more pleasant than the first, and Uttara and Abhimanyu had actually had a few short conversations that could, without stretching one's imagination, be considered friendly.

Abhimanyu, for his part, nurtured a small corner of romance in his heart, and so wished that this journey would not soon come to an end. His initial flirtations with Uttara, when he had first met her, had been a matter of habit as much as attraction, but over the past months he had come to like being around her in a companionable way as well as in a sensuous one. She fascinated him, she tempted him, she riled and delighted him. More than anything, she commanded his respect. Uttara was bold and forthright without making a show of it – the sign of a woman who took her equality as

a right and not a privilege. In fact, one of the things that had initially irked her the most about him was his overt assertion of the principle.

‘If a woman is truly your equal, prince,’ she had said, ‘then there is no need to talk about it. The more you spout these declarations and postulates, the more you reveal the truth of the matter – that in your world, women are not equal to men, and so rhetoric to the contrary is required.’

It had also astonished Abhimanyu to find that Uttara preferred his mother Subadra’s company more than she did Panchali’s. He had thought that Panchali and Uttara had more in common, given their outspoken nature and their battle-training, but Uttara seemed more comfortable with the demure and feminine Subadra. When Abhimanyu had questioned Uttara about this, he had been rewarded, not with a rant but with an equally critical explanation: ‘Subadra made a choice. A free choice to be as she wishes, as aligns with her nature. Panchali – don’t get me wrong, she is an admirable woman – but I suspect in her youth a lot of her behaviour and mannerisms came from the need to show herself as a man’s equal.’ Uttara had laughed at herself and admitted, ‘See how difficult it is to talk of such things in a language, a way of thinking, that defines how we are. I, who hold to such views, must talk of Subadra as feminine and Panchali as masculine, to distinguish their behaviours. How can we change a system when we remain inside it?’

The question had been rhetorical, but had spun another one in Abhimanyu’s mind, and yet another after that, till he was left with the ultimate doubt of them all: How could Govinda, how could anyone, change a system that they were already a part of, and yet remain within its bounds?

Lost in thought, Abhimanyu did not notice the man hidden in the thicket or the arrow that left his bow. He reacted with the instinct of training to the twang of the bowstring, but it was already too late to counter the shaft that came at him. Before he could do anything further, a strong body hurtled towards him, pushing him into cover in a rough but effective way.

‘The arrow would have hurt less,’ he grumbled. Uttara did not bother to retort; she was already back on her feet, bow drawn, arrow notched, ready to engage with the man who had shot at them. But she did not. Guessing the

reason for her inaction, Abhimanyu stood up, his bare hands held up in a sign of submission. ‘We come in peace!’ he called out. Uttara stayed as she was, waiting for a response from their attacker. They remained that way for a few tense moments, Abhimanyu not daring to move, not even to wipe the sweat that ran off his forehead and into his eyes. At last, a voice from behind the trees called out a command to lower all weapons and move into plain sight.

Over twenty Rikshasas – forest-dwellers – mostly men but a few women also among them, came out from the cover of the jungle, their bows down but with arrows still set to the string. The sight was an impressive one, all the more so for the horned headgear that each soldier wore. Dark streaks of some oily substance, applied in a pattern that the couple could not readily identify, covered the warriors’ faces and arms. Bright jungle fowl feathers and simple wooden beads made for jewellery as well as decorations for their slim wooden bows. But it was the man who now joined the forest warriors who completely took their breath away.

He was tall by any reckoning and appeared more gigantic for the way he emerged through the morning mist. Slender but well-built and broad, the man moved with the lithe grace of a jungle creature, his dark, shining skin rippling with the strength of his muscles. Of his face there was little to see but white teeth that shone through a wide grin and his head, round and smooth as an overturned pot.

The man spoke, revealing himself as the command voice that had called off the imminent attack: ‘Strangers don’t come in peace to these lands, without reason. They are either desperate or ambitious, usually both, to risk encountering us Rikshasas. Do you know what they say about us, in the land of our neighbours, the Kurus?’

Abhimanyu said, ‘They call you demons and magicians. But I’ve hardly met a person I’ve liked whom the Kurus did not find some fault with… The people of Eastern Kuru, that is.’

‘Interesting choice of words. Who are you and what do you want?’

‘We are emissaries of Dharma Yudhisthir, Emperor of Aryavarta and King of Western Kuru. We have come to see your chief, Pallavi Hidimbi.’

The declaration had an effect, not just on the Rikshasa leader, but on all the assembled forest-dwellers. At length, the leader said, ‘You come many years too late. Pallavi Hidimbi is dead.’

‘I…oh…’ Abhimanyu faltered, unsure of what he ought to say next.

Uttara cut in, ‘Please… Our condolences to you for the loss of your Chief, though I realize it may be too late. The loss is also mine – I had heard a lot about her, her valour and wisdom, and had greatly desired to meet her.’

The words seemed to placate the gigantic man, or at least stir his curiosity. He said, ‘You say you are emissaries of Dharma Yudhisthir.’

‘We are,’ Uttara said. ‘We have come to seek an alliance with your people, to our mutual interest; indeed, in the interests of all Aryavarta. Who succeeds Chief Hidimbi?’

‘I do,’ the bald man replied. ‘I am her son, though I rule by the will of my people and not by virtue of descent.’

‘Chief,’ Abhimanyu stepped forward. ‘We have much to talk about, to discuss…’

The Chief held up a restraining hand. ‘Impressive. But not enough. You come bearing big promises and claim the backing of those who do not know who I am, or the simple fact of who leads us. You have come because you find us useful. As I said earlier, desperation and ambition are the only reason why your kind have set foot in these forests, including, I might add, your *Emperor*, Dharma Yudhisthir or *any* of his kin. Why then should we place any faith in you or what you say?’

Uttara said, ‘We could give you a number of reasons, Chief. We could say that your trust in us is well-placed because I am Princess Uttara of Matsya, the daughter of Chief Virat. Like you and your people, I know what it is like to be ostracized and shunned because we upset the precious hierarchy of those in power. Or we could say it is because my companion here is Abhimanyu Karshni of the Kurus, heir to Dharma Yudhisthir’s throne and a man who means for the future to be different.’

‘Indeed,’ Abhimanyu added, ‘because, Chief, both you and I know that the future must be different…Purbaya Hidimbya, son of Bhim Vikrodara

and Chief Hidimbi of the Rikshasas.’

The statement was no revelation to the Chief’s people, but Uttara was taken aback. She swore under her breath, the action drawing smiles of amusement from those who heard her, and regarded Abhimanyu with new respect.

Abhimanyu continued, ‘But the point is, Cousin Hidimbya, that none of those reasons matter. For too long we have been slaves to these norms and hierarchies, these complex webs of politics and power that overshadow the very reason why civilization came into existence; for too long you and your people have paid the price. Firewright, Firstborn…Kuru, Arya…for too long their fights have been ours, though our fight has never been theirs. What difference has it made who leads us, because we have never led ourselves… I am not one of them, no matter my birth. I am one of you, one with everything, because my mind is capable of reason and my heart is capable of compassion. Will you not accept me? Will you not help me? Will you not hear me out?’

Hidimbya looked around at his people, taking silent counsel from them. Some had tears in their eyes; many smiled. Hidimbya was deep in thought, considering all that Abhimanyu had said. He then opened his arms in welcome. ‘Come, you both must be tired. You must rest and eat while you tell me more of what it is you need of me.’

‘You will help us?’ Uttara could not believe the task was so easily done.

‘But of course,’ Hidimbya said. He turned to Abhimanyu. ‘I shall help as far as I can. Your words hold truth, brother, and for that I will also accept the wisdom in them.’

Abhimanyu laughed, as an unnamed joy welled up in him. ‘The truth is mine, brother, for I stand by the words I have spoken. As for the wisdom in them… That, I cannot lay claim to. They were taught to me by another man, one who lives his very life by them.’

‘A wise man, indeed!’

‘You might have heard of him. His name is Govinda Shauri.’

14

AS UTTARA HAD SUSPECTED, THE TASK SHE AND ABHIMANYU HAD come to accomplish was not that easily done.

Hidimbya and the Rikshasas spared no effort in making her and Abhimanyu feel welcome and comfortable. The thatched hut they were given for their stay was unique, inasmuch as it was set on the branches of a tree. Considering the newness of the experience, the couple was placed in a dwelling close to the ground, but save this aspect there was little that distinguished one hut from another; not even the Chief's. It was not that they always lived in such houses, Uttara was told – in other parts of the woods, their huts were built on land or sometimes set up against hillocks and stones, or within natural caves and hollows. But, Hidimbya confessed to her, he personally enjoyed about living in the tree canopy. 'It feels like a green womb,' he said.

Abhimanyu had said, 'I have heard that description before.'

'We have a fondness for naming things as we see them,' Hidimbya said. He smiled to himself, ran a hand over his shining head and said, 'For instance, here I am blessed with a perfectly good and respectable name like Purbaya, and do you know what everyone insists on calling me?' He paused, looking from Abhimanyu's curious face to Uttara's, before saying, 'Ghatothkach. They call me that because they say my head is shaped like a pot.' He smiled at them with good-natured pride and his visitors burst out laughing. Uttara muttered the name under her breath a couple of times, enjoying the way the earthy word rolled off her tongue.

'It's not a bad name, you know,' she said. 'You could do worse. Imagine if you were called Abhimanyu! How difficult it would be to scold you…'

‘Well said, Mahamatra,’ Hidimbya joined in on the opportunity for some harmless amusement at Abhimanyu’s expense.

Despite the familiarity and banter they had developed with Hidimbya, politeness kept Abhimanyu and Uttara from pressing the Chief to discuss the reasons for their visit. But after two days of exploring forests in his company, as well as feasting and merrymaking with the tribe as a whole, the two began wondering when the opportunity might present itself.

It was, therefore, completely unintentional on Uttara’s part when she finally spoke of the imminent and that too in such a casual way. She said, as she swallowed the last drops of a rice and fruit gruel that formed part of their evening meal, ‘Oh Chief, this is excellent! I had thought no one could be a better cook than your father, but truly you excel him! One more week of eating this way, and neither I nor Abhimanyu shall fit into our respective armours, if it comes to war…’ She stopped short as she realized what she had inadvertently done and glanced up from her gruel-pot, first at Hidimbya and then at a stunned Abhimanyu.

After an awkward pause, Hidimbya said, ‘Eat. Gruel is always best had hot off the fire.’

Uttara gratefully turned her attention back to her food. The three of them finished eating in silence, save for the few words they exchanged with those attending to them as a matter of courtesy.

Once the meal was cleared away, Hidimbya returned to the topic of his own accord. ‘Well,’ the Chief began, ‘it would undoubtedly be pleasant to pretend that my culinary skills and our sylvan surroundings are what keep you here, but we all know that it is not so. You presented me with a proposal. It is time I gave you my answer.’

‘You have thought over it?’ Uttara asked, glad that her error had served a purpose after all.

‘Yes,’ Hidimbya replied, ‘and my concerns have increased, not lessened.’ Before Uttara could protest, he held up a restraining hand. ‘Please, allow me to explain: Cousin Abhimanyu here knows the story, though you may or may not. My mother, Pallavi, met and married Bhim Vikrodara of the Kurus when he was in rather dire circumstances. He and

his brothers, and their mother too, were fleeing for their lives. They had just escaped an attempt at assassination by faking their own deaths in a fire at Varana, and were little more than hapless refugees when they entered this forest.'

'If you think it was a marriage of convenience…' Abhimanyu started.

Hidimbya shook his head. 'No. I trust my mother's heart as well as her head. She would not have married a man unless she loved him, nor would she have been fool enough to mistake any ulterior motive on his part for love. I have no doubt that my making was a sacred act of affection. But the story does not begin there, Cousin. Have you ever wondered why your uncles and grandmother came into our forest when they fled from Varana?'

'Surely, proximity to Varana is the obvious explanation.'

'Yes, but there is another reason, and it is equally obvious once you come to know of it. Our people, our lands… We were conquered by Prince Pandu of the Kurus. He was not known for his military achievements as such, but this much is fact: He was our overlord. Who would you go to in times of trouble, Abhimanyu? The vassal who is sworn to your fickle enemy? Or one who was sworn to your father, conquered by him in person?'

'I still don't understand…'

'My father and mother… Their story is an aberration, one that has, till now, remained untold and unknown. It is only out of great need that Dharma Yudhisthir allows it to be revealed – not very different from what his father did, or what *he* did, all those years ago. Where was Dharma Yudhisthir through all the years when he ruled as Emperor? What did he do for us? I hold no ill-will towards my father, nor towards you as a brother, but I'd be a fool of a chief if I didn't look out for my people. You ask us to come to war? You ask us to come to die for you? What have we ever got from the Emperor to owe him our allegiance? What have I ever got from my own family? How do I trust that if Dharma Yudhisthir is restored to power, he won't just discard us, as his kind always have?'

Uttara said, 'But it is not Dharma Yudhisthir you fight for. We of Matsya stand by this cause for a greater reason.'

‘Mahamatra, I make no judgement on your people’s decision to side with Dharma Yudhisthir or his cause. I can only say that I have consulted with mine, and we find the risk too great.’

‘The risk of death?’ Abhimanyu was terse.

‘The risk of dying in vain. Forgive me, cousin, but though I like you, I cannot trust you. You are, after all, heir to Dharma Yudhisthir’s throne.’

‘And you, Chief? Would you trust yourself? Would your people risk trusting you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, Chief, that it is not I who am the true heir to Dharma Yudhisthir’s throne. It is you. So the real question here is: Can you trust yourself? Can your people trust that you will fight this war, not to make Dharma emperor but to prove that he could not have lost his empire in the first place? This is a revolution, Chief, it is a way of telling every living person in Aryavarta that no one, not even its Emperor, can treat its people with impunity. Aryavarta belongs, has always belonged, to its people. It was never any emperor’s to lose.’

15

UTTARA AND ABHIMANYU LEFT AT DAWN THE NEXT DAY, CARRYING both pleasant memories of their stay and a solemn promise from the Rikshasas that they would side with Dharma Yudhisthir. Afternoon found the couple taking a short break on their journey to Kamyaka, and from there, home to Upaplavya.

They were still in well-forested regions, each glade as scenic and verdant as the next, but Abhimanyu chose their resting place considering the abundance of fruits and berries around them. They were not as yet hungry enough to need to hunt, nor was he inclined to do so for sport and so, tethering both their horses to a tree with thick tufts of grass amongst its roots, he set about bringing fruits down by the simple but expedient method of throwing stones at them. Through it all, Uttara stood silent and stunned as she had been since the previous evening.

Abhimanyu tapped her on the shoulder, bringing her out of her daze. ‘Are you all right,’ he asked as he handed her some fruit. He found himself an overturned tree trunk nearby to sit on, and bit into his own fruit with relish. ‘Eat!’ he commanded, when he saw Uttara rooted to her spot.

Uttara suddenly came to life and turned to face him. He stopped mid-bite as his eyes caught the flash in hers. ‘What you told Hidimbya…’

‘It’s true. Dharma Yudhisthir and Panchali resolved not to have children so that there would be no conflict over which of the brothers’ children inherited the throne. They decided that the eldest of all the brothers’ children would be deemed their heir, though at that point it was not the Imperial throne they spoke of. In any case, now you see why our little trip was such a secret.’

Uttara said, ‘It isn’t a secret we need to keep from Syoddhan alone… But how will we get Emperor Dharma to agree?’

‘Father…that is, Uncle Govinda, will see to that. He would never speak anything but the truth, but he has no qualms being parsimonious with it. As far as I understand, the Emperor believes we intend to rely on filial affections and not political assurances. But it is a conclusion he has reached on his own, and Father simply does not inform him to the contrary.’

‘Why do you call him “Father”?’ Uttara asked, giving voice to the question she had nursed for a long time.

‘Because Govinda Shauri is the first – and only – father I’ve truly known. Partha Savyasachin wasn’t around often, when I was a child, and I grew up mostly at Dwaraka. Pradymna, obviously, called Govinda ‘father’ and I just followed him. It’s like when my other cousins – Uncle Bhim and Uncle Nakul’s sons, for example – call Emperor Dharma “Agraja” because that is how they’ve always heard their parents refer to him.’

Uttara laughed. She then added, ‘And so, you have one more cousin now. One you should call “agraja”.’

‘Yes. By Rudra, I can’t imagine how Hidimbya must have felt when he saw us standing there. Frankly, I’d expected fighting. So had Fa… Uncle Govinda.’

‘Understandable. They do have fair cause to hold a grudge against the Kurus.’

‘That, and then some. Imagine, we’ve let Hidimbya and his mother wallow in their solitude and anger, depriving them of the rights that we as Arya claim to uphold. How useful for us that Rikshasas are not Arya, and so Hidimbya is not of noble blood. To tell you the truth, the Rikshasas’ land was held by my ancestors as being of more use than the people who lived on it.’

‘And now that they are more useful than their land, we come to barter with them,’ Uttara finished, bitterness straining her voice.

Abhimanyu shook his head. ‘What’s worse is that we expect their allegiance despite all that we have done, because Divine Order decrees it thus. Now do you see, Uttara? Now do you see the question I grapple with

day and night? How does one change what one is already a part of? I have heard stories of how Uncle Govinda and Uncle Balabadra united the various feudal lords among the Yadus to build a land where the people were supreme. Dwaraka. But did that happen because Govinda was crown prince of Surasena, the nation of the Yadus? If a mere gwala had tried to challenge the centuries-old practice of succession and create a Janapada – a nation run by its people – would that have worked?'

'It works in Matsya. Our Chief is elected by the people, and my title of princess is just a term of respect. It also works here, for the Rikshasas. Both nations choose their leaders.'

'And both nations have suffered for their so-called heresy; their defiance of the Divine Order. I don't understand,' Abhimanyu shook his head in resignation. 'Even the Yavanas have found merit in the idea that the people must be their own sovereign, but we, those of the land where the notion was born, continue to cling to our old ways of hierarchy and fealty. What monster am I heir to, Uttara? If we win this war, then what?'

Uttara considered him with genuine interest. 'Is this purely guilt, Abhimanyu, or…?'

'Guilt is of no use. I want answers. And I ask you in all sincerity to help me understand. You are right, Matsya is not a kingdom, though you may well be called a princess. Can Aryavarta too aspire to such change? Will we ever be an empire, where the people are their own sovereign?'

'Maybe it is not only for Syoddhan's benefit that Govinda calls for a muster. There are others who must see, who must understand. They must see the power, the presence of the people of Aryavarta – the commoners, as they are called by those who rule them so that they can be conveniently ignored. The muster is not meant to put Dharma back in power by a show of might, but to change the meaning of power itself.'

'So… If Syoddhan submits…'

'It vitiates the wager of the Empire. But what is more important is the reason why the wager is vitiated, for it questions the fundamental premise of a system of feudal subservience. Where we go from there remains to be seen.'

‘Where we go from there is clear, Uttara,’ Abhimanyu declared, a newfound resolution in his eyes. ‘I promised Ghatothkach… that is…Chief Hidimbya, that no matter what we call our leaders – emperors, chiefs, kings – they will be chosen by the people. That promise I will keep, with my life or my death. Besides,’ he added, allowing himself a smile, ‘just imagine looking down from the turrets of Indr-prastha at thousands and thousands of Rikshasas and Nagas, not to mention Kashi’s foresters and farmers, Yadu gwalas and Kalinga’s fishermen, if Uncle Shikandin can work his charm. Oh, and forgive me, your fellow Matsyans too! It will be an army mightier than any we have ever seen. Neither Uncle Syoddhan nor Uncle Dharma can defy that.’

Abhimanyu’s eyes gleamed as he gazed into the distance, as though he were soaring over mighty mountains and vast seas. He said, ‘A new age dawns, Uttara. The Wheel of Time has turned. Not too long from now – hopefully in our lifetime – Aryavarta will be a janapada, a realm ruled by its people, the largest such in the world!’ He slowly drew back to reality and turned to his wife. ‘I wish I could say that would be my gift to you, Uttara. But this gift is not mine to give. It has always belonged to the people. In fact, I will need your help to understand, to see how this must be done. Will you help me?’

In response, Uttara held out her hand. ‘It is a long journey back home, Prince Abhimanyu. Which is just as well, for we have much to talk about.’

It took the stunned Abhimanyu a few moments to respond, but when he did it was with a dazzling smile. He took her hand and let her pull him to his feet. Together, they set out homeward.

16

‘ARE YOU ASLEEP?’

The words contained a familiarity that required neither respect nor restraint as a prelude, a familiarity that was shared with few and admitted to fewer still. After all, Sadev and his twin brother Nakul knew that it would never do to remind the world, their half-brothers included, of the simple fact of their birth: While Dharma, Bhim and Partha were of Pritha’s womb, he and Nakul were the sons of another mother: Madri.

Yet, after Madri’s death, it was Pritha who had raised them, Pritha who had insisted that they always think of themselves not as five, but as one. Dharma, too, had treated them no different than he did Bhim and Partha, nor had Nakul and Sadev considered themselves so. That day, though, for the first time in all these years, the brothers had genuinely felt that they were the first, not the last; that they were princes in their own right, and not just because they were Dharma Yudhisthir’s brothers. It was this, Sadev knew, that kept Nakul from sleeping.

‘I’m awake,’ he answered, waiting for his twin to speak his mind. But Nakul merely sighed, and turned to lie on his back and stare at the ceiling. Sadev knew better than to insist. For lack of anything better to do, he too turned onto his back and began to study the decorative patterns on the ceiling, noting how they tended to show mountains and trees, quite different from the intricate patterns typical to Central Aryavarta. He had not been to Madra, his mother’s kingdom, since childhood, and knew little of its similarities and differences with Kuru. Even during the Imperial campaign that Govinda had conducted in Dharma’s name, it had been Nakul who had covered the western frontier, while he, Sadev, had travelled to

Dakshinavarta. Now, as he thought about it, much was different, yet something remained the same. And that something was crucial to the future of Aryavarta.

‘I can’t sleep,’ Nakul declared.

Sadev greeted the statement with a smile in the darkness, knowing well that his brother meant to talk. He decided to expedite the process, and turned on to his side to face his twin. ‘What’s bothering you?’

‘Everything! I can’t believe Uncle Shalya said he needed to think over our request for an alliance! I mean, what is there to think about? We are his nephews, we are as good as sons to him. How can he not help us?’

‘Why should he, Nakul? What have we done with the trust and faith he reposed in us, but gamble it away?’

‘That’s…’

‘Beside the point? It is the very point, Nakul. It is why Syoddhan is ready to risk war against us. It is why Govinda is prepared to go to war for us. And it is also why the nations are allying either with us or with Syoddhan, including Madra.’

‘Yes, yes…I know the rhetoric. I am only amazed that anyone takes it seriously. When we built the empire, when we put together our Imperial campaign, love and blood ties got us to the negotiating chamber – but they weren’t enough to garner pledges of allegiance. Each nation had its own gains and costs to consider. We promised them the power of trade, the security of a united realm, and a future filled with prosperity. What can we promise anyone now? Frankly, Syoddhan’s rule has done the same or more than what Dharma’s rule did for trade and commerce, and certainly not less. Why then should they put all that progress at risk and go to war? And assuming they agree to declare support as a measure of might or to test the waters, then why would it be for us? Beyond the armies of Matsya and a handful of Yadus, do you really think anyone will side with us?’

Sadev did not reply.

Nakul continued, ‘And just supposing someone thought to ally with us, how long do you think it would last? Until they hear of what Syoddhan’s might is?

‘When we left Upaplavya, at best we had an akshauhini division and a half. The total might of Matsya combined with every straggling bit of strength that Yuyudhana, Govinda and Pradymna could draw from the Yadus on account of personal relationships. Let us make the most favourable of assumptions – that both Uncle Shalya and Dhrupad of Panchala side with us. At best, that brings our numbers to three akshauhini. Syoddhan, on the other hand, already has twice that number! The Kuru forces themselves number two akshauhini, if we take into account those at Indr-prastha and Hastina. Asvattama’s men are one akshauhini, but I hear they are a cutthroat lot, whom he trains himself. Vasusena has his men, nearly a full division, too, if all his vassal lords come through. Jayadrath brings another division, and his natural ally, the King of Qamboja, brings one more. Of course, the Qamboja army is filled with mercenaries and for all we know Jayadrath may decide to hire more Yavanas and Danavas. Susarman of Trigarta is Matsya’s enemy and, so, Syoddhan’s friend. He has a little less than an akshauhini, if Virat’s spies are right. That brings us to seven, seven and a half already, does it not? Who have I left out? Oh yes, Gandhara. But their men aren’t all that many, not when we are talking seven akshauhini. After all, what is a division here or there,’ he added, sarcastic, and concluded, ‘So even if we count the rest of Aryavarta’s nations as being undecided, tell me, to whose side would you want to give your support?’

Again, Sadev did not reply.

Nakul waited, his eyes fixed on his twin. At length, he asked, ‘Do you trust Govinda Shauri?’

This time Sadev responded. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Answer me, Sadev! Speak plainly. Stop being circumspect for a moment.’

‘I…’ Sadev hesitated. Breathing in deep, he summoned the memory of what he had seen in Govinda’s eyes years ago in the forests of Kamyaka. ‘I do,’ he declared. ‘I trust him.’

‘Enough to believe that he will not lead us to war?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

The question was a simple one, but Sadev knew the answer was not. ‘Have you been treated this way before, Nakul – as a person, and not as an appendage? My answer is yes…and no. Yes, because that is how Govinda has always made me feel; as though I’m different, I’m Sadev. But no, because he has never made me feel special, like I am a prince, but rather that I need be nothing but myself to be worthy of respect. Don’t tell me you’ve not felt that way too around him?’

‘I have,’ Nakul agreed. ‘Which is why I am here…because he told me to come here. I just wish I understood better what he wanted of us all.’

Sadev chose his words with care. ‘In every story, there are heroes. But it is not always the heroes who move the tale forward or do what needs be done. There are others, and their story is hardly told. We are such men, Nakul. We are not heroes, we are those who stand by them, in their shadows. The world will speak of Dharma Yudhisthir, of Bhim Vikrodara and Partha Savyasachin and…and their brothers. It is how things are. But that does not mean that we cannot, do not, turn the tide.’

Nakul sat up with a jerk. ‘And you are happy with this? You are content with being but a number, a part of a whole that does nothing for us?’

‘Why not?’ Sadev countered. ‘It’s still a better part than what Panchali got. After all, the whole, as you call it, did not even stand up for her. Who tells her story? No, don’t answer that; don’t state the obvious. Just remember that we are here to do what we can, what we must. That is all that matters.’

Nakul remained motionless for a long time, considering his brother’s words. Then he lay back down. ‘And what is it that we must do now?’

‘Come morning, we confront Uncle Shalya. We ask him to declare his allegiance – for or against us.’

‘And if he goes against us, if he sides with Syoddhan?’

‘Then, brother,’ Sadev said, ‘we have far bigger things to worry about than *our* place in history.’

17

DAWN BROUGHT WITH IT A CLOUDLESS, BRIGHT SKY AND, OVER the morning meal, Shalya asked his nephews how they planned to enjoy the day.

‘We were hoping to speak with you, Uncle,’ Sadev replied.

Shalya considered the two men and then raised his hand to signal to the attendants serving the meal. Immediately, the room emptied of all attendants, at which the few courtiers too left, though in a less hurried manner. Finally, the King of Madra and his nephews were alone in the large dining hall.

Shalya looked at his nephews. ‘I too was hoping to talk to you.’

‘Oh?’

‘Tell me, Sadev, Nakul… Have you two considered the fact that Madra is twice the size of Kuru as it once was? Which makes it many times the size of Western Kuru, as that strip of a nation is now called.’

Nakul said, ‘I don’t see the relevance, Uncle.’

‘Then you don’t see reality. Did you ever wonder why a nation twice the size of Kuru allowed its dearest and only princess to be married – that, too, as a secondary wife to the second prince of the kingdom? I refer here to your mother, of course.’

‘You tell us why.’

‘Tyranny. The fear of tyranny. My father, your grandfather, saw what Bhisma Devavrata did to Gandhara, how he turned it to fire and ruin with his wrath, and took Gandhari as a bride for Dhristashtra. Oh, don’t look so surprised. It is not as well known as what Bhisma did when he subjugated Kashi and brought those princesses – Ambika and Ambalika – to Hastina, but it is equally a fact that he razed Gandhara to the ground. We did not

wish for Madra to share the same fate as Gandhara. Those weren't marriages or alliances, my sons. Pritha, Madri, Gandhari…each one of Hastina's brides was the sign of a conquest, an annexation…or worse…'

Shalya trailed off into what were obviously dark thoughts. Nakul was about to speak but Sadev stopped him with a meaningful glance. The twins had heard rumours that there had been a third princess of Kashi involved in that tale, one whom their uncle had been in love with. Still, it did not seem an appropriate occasion to offer consolation, especially when such words could be easily mistaken for an act of manipulation. It was, the brothers realized as one, best to be direct.

'Then why do you hesitate, Uncle?' Nakul said. 'It is against that very tyranny that we ask you to side with us.'

'Yes,' Shalya sighed, 'side with you, but not for you. Rather, for another tyrant, a man who doesn't deserve to rule. You may think of Dharma Yudhisthir as your brother, but I…'

Sadev said, 'You must understand Dharma's probity, Uncle. He meant no wrong. He did as he did because he thought he was justified. He and I have spoken about this often during our exile. There is no doubt that law and scripture both permitted him to act as he did.'

Shalya's jaw briefly tightened. Then he said, 'Yes, Sadev. Law and scripture may well be on his side. But if law and scripture were all that mattered, then a piece of parchment may well be king and a stone edict, emperor. One who seeks to lead must be capable of independent thought, of reason and restraint, both. Dharma… Never mind. There is no point dwelling on the past. It's the future we must think about. I have a proposal.'

Sadev and Nakul sat forward, eager.

Shalya continued, 'Madra has more for two than Kuru will ever have for five. I propose we declare ourselves neutral, on the condition that you two are crowned kings of Madra, no matter who prevails. I have thought about this. As it stands, both Dharma and Syoddhan would agree, simply because my neutrality may possibly deprive the other side of a full akshauhini of forces. Stay here with me, my sons. It is time we turned our attention to our people and our land. Let these bloody-thirsty Kurus settle their squabbles

on their own. For too long has the rest of Aryavarta paid the price for their ambition and sense of superiority. It is time to show them that we cannot be treated with such impunity!'

Silence, and then as one, the twins stood up from the table. 'You're right, Uncle,' Nakul said, speaking for the both of them. 'We cannot be treated with such impunity. For better or worse, we are Kaurava – men of Kuru – Sadev and I. No matter the mistakes our forebears may have made, whether you call it tyranny or ambition, it is our duty to set right those wrongs. And that won't be achieved by adding disloyalty and selfishness to the list of Kuru's faults. We will not abandon our brother, Dharma Yudhisthir, nor will we forsake Pritha, the mother who has raised us. As for what you wish to do, Uncle, that is up to you.'

Shalya exhaled loudly and placed both his palms on the wooden table in a gesture of resolution. 'You put me in a difficult position, my sons. I do not have the heart to leave you to take your chances with those Kurus, and yet…' He paused, letting his thoughts set themselves in place and then said, 'All right, then. I will come to Matsya with my armies. I will come to fight for you. Though, I shall confess, it galls me to do so. I am, my dear boys, a man who believes in Divine Will. Perhaps this moment was brought to me so that I may understand Bhisma Devavrata and the Kurus better, for I finally know what it feels like to break a principle in the cause of its own defence. Rudra save me. Rudra save us all.'

18

THE SECRET KEEPER OF THE FIREWRIGHTS WAS A CONSIDERABLY well-informed man. By his own admission, more often than not this served to make him unhappier than most. He already knew, to the last detail, the incidents that had transpired recently at Hastina. Most of them had gone as planned, justifying the years of sacrifice and obscurity that he had endured. Even when the Empire changed hands, when Dharma was forced into exile, when Govinda was a broken man, the great chain of events the Firewrights had set into motion continued, inexorable. The Secret Keeper had ensured it be so.

When Govinda had finally emerged from his well of despair, the Secret Keeper had rejoiced at the return of one of the finest minds Aryavarta had seen through the ages. But the Govinda he met then was a different man – different and dangerous. Govinda retained his acumen, no doubt, but no longer had either the Firewrights' dispassion to use it objectively or any concern for the less efficient but nevertheless useful notions of duty and destiny that the Firstborn held dear.

Rebel.

Many times had that name been used for Govinda Shauri, but never before had he so deserved it nor would so many pay the price for his self-indulgence.

The Secret Keeper thought immediately of Philista and her suffering. A pang of pity came with the memory, and went just as quickly as his mind moved on to the words she had spoken about him. The opinion she had expressed of him had come as a shock, more so than the fact that despite all the torture she had endured she had taken the secret of his identity to her

pyre. Or perhaps, he wondered, she had truly not known his identity, in which case her courage in the face of death was all the more laudable. As for the momentous things that had happened soon after – from Bhisma's unequivocal declaration of his allegiance to Syoddhan, and Govinda's dramatic assertions in the assembly hall – they had all gone as expected.

The events, however, gave the Secret Keeper less satisfaction than they ought to have. With a sigh, he admitted to himself that he was disappointed, not with the outcomes in themselves, but with Govinda Shauri. Once, he had reckoned Govinda amongst his dearest friends and strongest allies. Now, not only was Govinda the enemy, he seemed to have become a most predictable and malleable man. *Indr-prastha*, he mused. *What an obvious and indisputable goal!* But then, it was inevitable. The more a man thought he dealt in intrigue, the more predictable he became. Govinda was no exception.

Nor was Sanjaya.

The Secret Keeper had known that it was but a matter of time before Sanjaya had begun to suspect Suka's declared motives, and not without cause. Suka's words to him contained enough that Sanjaya could construe as a promise, while Suka could deny that he had meant it that way. But the words had had their intended effect: Sanjaya believed that Suka would make him Emperor of Aryavarta. To Sanjaya, no true scholar could make a false promise, but at the same time he knew that no true scholar would ever sanction wanton destruction and war. His attempts to grapple with the consequent logical contradiction made Sanjaya's actions foreseeable beyond doubt. And so…

The Secret Keeper decisively set his mind on the next move, though not without a trace of tiredness. *Stay focussed*, he told himself firmly. *Don't confuse others' goals with your own. Remember why you do what you do. Remember what it is you want.* The caution sounded in his mind in a voice that was his own but not quite, for he recognized it immediately as being Ghora Angirasa's.

The question that followed was his own: *But what do I want?*

This time, his teacher's voice rang clear: *Time. All you need is time. You must fulfil the task that was left to you. War and peace are fleeting, kingdoms and empires are transient. Only one thing endures. Knowledge. It is true power*.

'It is power, indeed,' the Secret Keeper said out loud as he walked into the stone-lined room startling Vaishampayana, the Firstborn scholar who sat hunched over a bundle of palm leaves, squinting in the dark confines despite the wick lamp set before him.

Vaishampayana smiled, understanding his fellow scholar's unstated words, for they were spoken often by those who frequented the space they now occupied – the small, deceptively bare entrance chamber to the great library of Hastina. Even a daily visitor was, every now and then, moved by the import of what lay beyond the simple wooden doors at the other end of the room, and the Secret Keeper – though Vaishampayana did not know him to be such – was no exception.

'Welcome, Acharya,' Vaishampayana said, standing up to greet one of his four colleagues, the men to whom Dwaipayana Vyasa had left the task of compiling his books of knowledge.

The Secret Keeper returned the greeting, relishing the joy their shared charge brought. Such moments brought him immense enjoyment at being one of the Firstborn who served the all-important function of providing spiritual, moral and thus the appropriate material counsel to the entire population of Aryavarta. But more than the scholar-seers themselves, it was the nature of the counsel they provided that was of utmost value: allegiance to the Divine Order, allegiance to the precepts of the Vedas – the books of knowledge to which three generations of Vyasas had given corporeal form and allegiance to the hierarchy of Aryavarta. And so it was that he had divided, and thus made peace with, his identity. He was one of the Firstborn to all outwards appearances and yet completely the Secret Keeper of the Firewrights in his mind, the duality so seamless that it did not bother him that he claimed either affiliation.

The truth of the matter, however, was more complicated – a truth he did not dare admit: that to deny one also made him lose his claim to the other.

At the thought, a shiver coursed through his body, as though something utterly cold had melted into him. Shrugging it off, he passed into the main chamber of the library. The scribe in the entrance chamber shut the door behind him.

The Secret Keeper stood still, trying to centre himself, to empty and thus calm his mind as he relished the dim light and solitude of his surroundings. Later, he would blame the darkness for his failure to notice that he was not alone, but at that instant he let his surprise get the better of him and blurted out, ‘What are you doing here?’

It was a weak statement, all the more so given the man to whom it was addressed. Asvattama Bharadvaja curled his lips in a snide manner that could be called a smile and said, ‘Why? Am I not allowed to be here?’ He carefully placed the parchment he had been reading back into its receptacle on the wall and turned to face the other man.

The Secret Keeper recovered quickly. ‘Do trivialities like “allowed” and “ought to” matter to you, Asvattama? I was under the impression that you were master of your own will.’

‘Surely, *as men loyal to the Firstborn*, both you and I know that Divine Will is paramount and brought into force through Divine Order. “Allowed” and “ought to” have their place in that system, do they not?’

The Secret Keeper did not miss the emphasis on his loyalty to the Firstborn. He knew that Asvattama meant to provoke him with the words, though he wondered to what end. A possibility was considered, then dismissed. *No, he does not mean me; he cannot mean me. There is no way he could know who I truly am. He thinks me to be Firstborn, through and through.*

‘Well, Acharya, what would you rather have? Divine Order on earth? Or your precious library to yourself?’ Asvattama prompted.

‘As a matter of fact, Asvattama, I’d hoped to speak to you today. It is fortunate that I find you here.’

‘What could possibly be there for us to speak about?’

‘You do serve the Vyasa faithfully, do you not?’

‘Am I to understand that you now speak for him?’ Asvattama asked.

‘Do you doubt that I speak for the Firstborn?’ he snapped. ‘When Sanjaya brought you instructions, you never stopped to question whether they had truly come from the Vyasa’s person, or from elsewhere.’

‘I believed that my loyalty lay in obedience. It was for the Vyasa to ensure the integrity of his instructions.’

‘Aah. Then it had nothing to do with the fact that the Vyasa’s instructions often served your own purposes? For example, when you were sent to kill the last of the Firewrights or discover their lost secrets?’

‘What if they did? I assumed that a man as wise as Acharya Dwaipayana would think it best to assign tasks to those most motivated to execute them. That I may have benefitted from my actions does not change the fact that it was all done on the Vyasa’s command.’

The Secret Keeper said, ‘I am glad you think so. Then you should have no hesitation in doing what the Vyasas – I refer here to Markand and to Veda-Vyasa Dwaipayana – wish you to do.’

The point was made. Asvattama said, ‘Well then? What instructions do you have for me?’

‘War seems inevitable.’

‘Does it? Syoddhan is clearly reluctant to march against his brothers.’

‘His personal feelings cannot overrule his duty. He knows that. Just as he refused to return Indr-prastha to Dharma Yudhisthir, he will go to war to protect and preserve our way of life.’

It was now that Asvattama showed the first trace of hesitation. ‘It doesn’t have to come to war. The Vyasa can…’

The Secret Keeper was stern. ‘The Vyasa knows what he is doing. His duty. You need to concentrate on yours.’

Asvattama took a step forward, as though to show he would not be dominated. ‘What you want, and what the Vyasas want, are your problems. If Syoddhan asks me what I think of war, I will tell him exactly what I think. You cannot make me lie to him, nor can you make me change my opinion.’

The Secret Keeper raised his hands in a placating gesture. ‘You need do neither. By the time Syoddhan comes to you, he will have already decided

in favour of war. Neither you nor I need trouble our consciences over that, for it is not we who will lead him there.'

'So, we do not lie, but we also do not refute another's lie because it serves our purposes. How clever,' Asvattama observed.

'What's new? Isn't that how it has always been done?'

'And you are comfortable with that assertion? Can you tell me now, without ambiguity, that war is indeed in the best interests of Aryavarta?'

'It is not my place to decide these matters. I follow the commands of my superiors. As a man of ochre I can set your conscience at rest but not your political curiosity.'

'Please don't insult my intelligence, Acharya, just as I shall not insult yours by saying that war is not to your benefit, or the benefit of those you represent. Clearly, there are interests here to be advanced and protected, and the possibility of war helps you do that. As to the extent of your involvement – as I said earlier, it is not for me to question the integrity of the Vyasa's instructions. But you are yet to convey them, and I don't have all day to wait for you to get to the point. What is it you want from me?'

The Secret Keeper hid his satisfaction well. 'I want your promise that you will side with Syoddhan no matter what lies ahead.'

Asvattama was visibly stunned by the request, and a little gratified. 'I thank you for your faith in me, Acharya – or the Vyasa's faith, as it were. But such a promise is redundant. I owe Syoddhan my allegiance and will serve him as best I can, promise or no promise.'

'That's not enough.'

'Not enough? What do you want of me, Acharya? How much more blood will it take before you…'

'Please, Your Highness,' the Secret Keeper was earnest. 'Please, for a moment, let us put aside our cynicism and egos, the burden of our duties, and speak as ordinary men. Whether you see it or not, whether you admit it or not, it is the best interests of Aryavarta that I hold in mind, as do the two Vyasas included. You may not agree with their actions, or mine, but please do not doubt our intent. Truly, I am not a bad man.'

Asvattama’s gaze was cold and unflinching. He said, ‘No. Not a bad man. Just a man obsessed with the ends, no matter what the means.’ He brushed disdainfully past the Secret Keeper and began walking towards the doorway.

‘Asvattama…’

‘I’ll do as you say, Acharya.’

‘You will.’

The Secret Keeper’s tone made the warrior stop and turn. The scholar smiled, satisfied. He held out his hand, the single grey feather that lay on his open palm making his slender fingers look longer still. ‘The two Vyasas must not be disturbed. The task of codifying the knowledge of Aryavarta into the Vedas, the books of knowledge, is at a critical juncture. It would not serve any purpose to distract the Firstborn Elders with these mundane happenings. For any messages you may wish sent to them, I am here. There will be no need for pigeons.’

‘In that case, perhaps you would be kind enough to convey a message to the elders since I no longer have the means of doing so?’

‘Yes…?’

‘Govinda Shauri has ridden out from Upaplavya. And my spies report that the newly-wedded couple has recently returned from a journey, ostensibly to some place of worship. The details of their travels are known to few, even in Virat’s inner circles.’

‘Hmm. I’d expected the first. The second piece of information, though unexpected, does not sound troubling. I suspect Govinda has been sending his trusted people out to barter with possible allies. But Abhimanyu and Uttara?’

‘I think,’ Asvattama said, ‘the more relevant question is whom he sent them to see.’

The Secret Keeper furrowed his brows, but kept his thoughts to himself. He said, ‘Let me know if you hear anything more.’

‘I leave for Indr-prastha in the morning, but I shall send word if there is anything of consequence. As for what I have just told you, you shall pass on the information…’

‘When…and if… I deem fit.’

‘I would deem it fit at the earliest, Acharya. Unless of course, in your wisdom you have expected this too. You see, I suspect that Govinda is headed towards the White Mountains. He is going to meet Dwaipayana.’

’You suspect? Or you know?’

‘Would it make a difference?’

‘No,’ the Secret Keeper admitted, ‘not really. Still…’

Asvattama said nothing, but turned and left, his gait strong with the satisfaction of knowing there was nothing further the Acharya could possibly say.

Finally, truly alone in the dim expanse, the Secret Keeper drew in a deep breath. He did not know what concerned him more at that moment: Govinda’s alleged actions, Asvattama’s lack of suspicion as to his identity, or the warrior’s assertion that he had something to gain from war being unleashed on the land. He closed his eyes as the notion taunted him, the implicit recognition of his influence stirring a heady sense of omnipotence. He could, he knew, try to stop the war. He could prevent the inevitable bloodshed and horror. All he had to do was proclaim the truth of who he was, step forth and openly declare himself the Secret Keeper of the Firewrights. Given the prevailing state of things, each and every leader, every monarch of Aryavarta, would fall over himself to swear loyalty to him. He could unite the region in peace, bind the nations of the realm together by the might of the Firewrights in a way that Govinda Shauri had never imagined. But that would mean he would have to abandon the ultimate task that had been left to him to fulfil. Surely, he reasoned, that would not matter. With the power that would be at his disposal, he could set everything right.

A new, uncanny emotion stirred in his being. It took him a while to identify it as ambition, a quality he had for so long been careful to avoid. To think that, after all these years, he had nearly succumbed to it… *No!* He set his resolve back in place. He had his one last duty. To reveal himself now would compromise that great undertaking, irreparably and for generations

to come. Indeed, it was in the interests of future generations, of Aryavarta and beyond, that he would keep his silence, no matter what.

Letting out a heavy breath, he set aside all thoughts of the ephemeral future and focussed on the matter before him. He had to ensure that Dwaipayana received the appropriate advice, and from the right person. And there was only one person Dwaipayana would now trust: His son and heir, Sukadeva Vasishta Varuni.

19

THE BITING WIND WAS A CONSTANT FEATURE AT DWAIPAYANA'S hermitage, one that Govinda Shauri had come well-prepared for. The firm set of his shoulders under the heavy cloak was, however, in expectation of a different lack of warmth, particularly since he neither remained useful to the Firstborn elder nor was likely to be held in good esteem. After all, he had been the one to reveal the secret of Dwaipayana's birth, thus losing his singular influence over the man. Still, Govinda knew better than to show his surprise when he was greeted without rancour by the old scholar.

'The last time you were here,' Dwaipayana said, 'you didn't need cloaks and such. Is it that these mountains have grown colder, or…?'

'I have grown older, Acharya, there is no doubt about it. I have also grown used to creature comforts and my appetite for adventure, in all its forms, wanes.'

Dwaipayana laughed. '"All its forms" is undoubtedly an exaggeration. Knowing you, that is…' His mirth gave way to seriousness. 'See, Govinda. That is the difference between you and I. You had the courage to admit you lost objectivity as soon as a deeper emotion began to rule your heart. I, on the other hand, have stuck to stubborn denial. I continue to claim objectivity, but in truth, I have let my love for my kin drive my decisions. It was a weakness I neither anticipated nor acknowledged.'

Govinda said, 'Love can never be a weakness, Acharya. I made the mistake of thinking it was so before I was driven by great pain to realize that it was not. Without love, we would not comprehend compassion.'

Dwaipayana nodded, as though he understood. 'Because it is in loving one that we learn to love the world…'

Govinda was gentle with his dissent. ‘That too. But it is more, Acharya. Love helps us to comprehend compassion because it helps us to understand creation; it helps us see why the Creator made us. We perceive ourselves as we were meant to be: Beings of light, capable of great things, of incessant growth… We do not need to learn to love the world, for that is what we do naturally. We only need to see ourselves for what we are. Compassion is but a word for that sense of sight.’

‘Compassion is also an aberrant word when used by one who leads thousands to war.’

‘Surely you, of all people, understand the principle that thousands of lives are a worthy sacrifice for the greater good of Aryavarta?’

‘I don’t think your war would achieve the greater good of Aryavarta. It would, in fact, break apart the very empire you built, that I encouraged you to build, for all the reasons we have discussed many times before – peace and prosperity not the least. These kinds of squabbles weaken us. Not only do they give foreign invaders a chance to attack while we are at war with each other, but also in the aftermath of such squabbles we are left with small, fragmented nations that are powerless in military terms and inefficient in economic terms.’

‘I am aware of that,’ Govinda replied, ‘and I also remember that, once upon a time, it was I who had to persuade others to see things this way. And that is the point. If we are to talk of persuasion, of discussion, of a rule of the people, then this monolith of a system must be shaken, perhaps broken.’

‘Once upon a time, you say. Yes, it does feel like a story, Govinda, a story gone horribly wrong. And now you come to me…for what?’ Dwaipayana’s eyes held a churning rage that left his feeble body shaking.

Govinda waited for the scholar to compose himself before saying, ‘A trade. I need your help. But I do not ask of it as a favour; I have something to offer in return.’

‘And what is this wonderful trade you propose, Govinda?’

‘Give me the present, Acharya. In return, I will give you the future.’

‘Surely the future is not yours to give?’

‘But the present is yours to taunt me with?’

Dwaipayana smiled. ‘It is difficult to have the last word with you, so I shall not try. But would you care to move past metaphors and get to the point?’

‘The point is simple. I am a Firewright. I don’t know what you think my intent or interest is in your famed project of codifying the knowledge of all Aryavarta given the longstanding dispute between your Order and mine, but in the interest of clarity I wish to tell you.’

‘And what can you tell me that I haven’t already suspected, Govinda? That you would rather the knowledge of the Firewrights spread, untamed and undisciplined, to contaminate and destroy all notions of the Divine Order?’

‘Frankly, yes. But, you see, that does not leave me opposed to your great endeavour, your books of knowledge. I don’t care what you write or do not write, or how you wish to record all that has come to pass. I will neither thwart you nor question your wisdom in presenting and interpreting matters to your convenience. You will determine how the story of the Kurus, of this entire realm will be remembered. It will not matter whether there is war, and if there is one then who wins or loses – who rules as Emperor and who dies on the battlefield without honour or dishonour, as the situation may be. Your place in history, the place of your progeny, is secure for millennia to come. Is that not power over the future?’

‘Indeed, it is,’ Dwaipayana agreed. ‘And what is it you want in return?’

‘Before long, Dharma Yudhisthir will falter. Only you can give him what he needs to continue.’

‘To what end? War?’

‘The imminence of war. Though I hope it will not come to that.’

‘And if we refuse?’

The voice that intruded on the conversation was a strong, familiar one. Govinda did not have to turn to identify the speaker. ‘Acharya Suka,’ he said. ‘I am honoured that you join us. But, last I heard, you were at Hastina. You and your companions must have ridden hard to arrive so quickly.’

‘I am just in time, I gather.’ Suka walked over to where Dwaipayana was seated and greeted the older man with a respectful bow, which was

received with an affectionate nod. He then took his place at Dwaipayana's side, a hand on his father's shoulder.

It could have been, Govinda noted, a sign of affection, though in all likelihood it was an order to the older man to show restraint. Suka continued, 'So let me get this clear: Dharma Yudhisthir, the very epitome of righteousness, falls prey to your war-mongering, enough so to ally himself with Matsya, the heathen dregs of Aryavarta. He is a good man, enough so to realize his own mistake before the end, but – and this is where your audacity amazes, Govinda – you want my father to reassure Dharma and convince him to continue on his forsaken path? I'd call you insane if I didn't know better, but really, I have no other explanation.'

'Then let me explain,' Govinda said. 'Dharma stands exactly where all the rulers of Aryavarta stand, caught between our two warring orders. And Panchali… Panchali is Aryavarta, ravaged and wounded by our feud. I think it's enough, Acharya.'

Suka said, 'Really, Govinda, I am impressed. Had I been anyone else but who I am, I'd be moved by your rhetoric, possibly to the point of agreeing with you.'

'It is not you who need be moved, Suka. Either by rhetoric, or more reasonable qualities such as compassion and justice. It is your father I have come to see. Unless he now needs your permission to act as his conscience dictates?'

It was a battle of both word and will, and Govinda knew it. He also knew he had played it well. Despite all his actions, Suka would not, could not, openly challenge his father's positions. He would have to defer to Dwaipayana, though Govinda had no doubt that Suka would find his own means of later countering the Elder if he wished to. For the moment, Govinda's point was made, and he knew better than to press it. He said, 'Forgive me, Acharya. I spoke in error. Whatever our differences may be, I cannot, in good conscience, accuse you of being anything but a faithful, dutiful son. I trust you will understand that again, for all our differences, I remain convinced that Dwaipayana Vyasa acts in the interests of Aryavarta,

and only in the interests of Aryavarta. All I humbly ask is that you help me resolve this situation without bloodshed.'

Dwaipayana said, 'And how do you propose we do that?'

'As I mentioned earlier, Dharma will need you. He will need your counsel. Most of all, he will need Dhrupad's support, and only you can ensure that he secures it. This is the barter I come to make.'

'It seems more a gamble than a barter, Govinda,' Suka pointed out.

'It seems I have learnt something from your dearest nephews, after all.'

'So you want me…us…to help you bring Dharma to war, though you say your intent is not bloodshed. Your reasons are your own, Govinda, but how do you expect me to…'

'It is no secret. I want Dharma to see… I want all of Aryavarta to see who stands by our side, who fights for us…and why.'

Suka sensed there was more to Govinda's words than the obvious, but was not sure if it would help or hinder him to delve further into them, particularly in front of his father. He made a noncommittal gesture of understanding and said, 'I'm sure my father would like some time to think on this matter…'

Govinda understood. He smiled and said, 'Now, if you will permit me…'

Dwaipayana sighed and nodded. With a simple word of thanks, Govinda left.

Father and son waited till the sound of Govinda's footsteps gave way to the sounds of a horse being untied, mounted and then ridden away. Only then did either of them stir.

'Suka…' Dwaipayana began. 'Trust me, Father.'

'But…'

'Govinda is right. Dharma will need your urging to go on. And he will need to go on, to come to the very brink of battle before he sees, as does Syoddhan, that this whole war is nothing but an elaborate illusion constructed by the Firewrights to seduce the kings of the land into undermining their own power. For similar reasons, we must also convince

Dhrupad that he is free to ally with his daughter and son-in-law, despite his ties and promises to Bhisma Devavrata.'

'What purpose does that serve?'

'By letting Dhrupad ally with Dharma, we lessen the difference in strength between Dharma's armies and Syoddhan's. The more equally matched the two opponents, the greater the chance that they will sue for peace instead of heading to war. Surely that is what we want?'

Dwaipayana's eyes held doubt. 'Is that what you want?'

Suka knelt and took his father's wrinkled, gnarled hands into his own. 'I want what you want, what your father wanted. An empire bound to Divine Order. But such order is now is at a precarious edge, and we must do all we can to keep the balance. Your personal differences with Bhisma apart, you trusted his allegiance enough to make him custodian of every Firewright weapon, of each astra that came into our hands during the Great Scourge. Can you trust his grandchildren the same way? And what about Dhrupad's children? It is not who made the astra that matters, but rather who now wields it. Bhisma, Dron, Asvattama – their loyalty to the Firstborn is beyond doubt.'

Dwaipayana studied his son, frowning as he tried to read Suka's thoughts in his eyes. 'What if, Suka…just what if…it comes to war? What will be said of us…that we acted to incite bloodshed when we ought to have acted to prevent it?'

'No, Father. The imminence of war is but a means to an end, and not the only means. As for how posterity will judge us, our actions… Did Govinda not say, quite accurately, that you control the future? It is always the victor's story that is told, Father. And we are going to win. Now, I hate to make a fuss, but it is time you rested. Sleep in peace. I am here now.'

Dwaipayana let his son settle him into a reclining position, and closed his eyes. Suka sat by his father's side, his large, strong hands lovingly curled around Dwaipayana's age-shrivelled fingers. His thoughts, however, rested on Govinda Shauri.

20

‘RUDRA BE PRAISED!’ SYODDHAN EXCLAIMED, AS ASVATTAMA LED him into yet another immaculately designed room in the royal palace of Indr-prastha. Most chambers they had surveyed had been large and airy, and designed to achieve balance between nature and the work of humans. What astounded Syoddhan about the particular room they had now moved into was the view that it offered.

From the high reaches of the royal palace, the city could be seen as more than just an aesthetic creation. Moving from room to room, Syoddhan had been able to appreciate the strategic layout of the city as a whole, its impregnable defences and ability to withstand long sieges being one of its numerous wonders. What he saw from the chamber they were in – a large, sparsely furnished room that provided a view in all directions – made him more certain of his ideas, and he said as much. ‘I’m not sure I agree with you, Asvattama. I was intrigued when Dhaumya initially kept asking for Indr-prastha on Dharma’s behalf, but I don’t think that is what Govinda ultimately wants. He built this city, he knows well that it is easily defended. Why not ask for it back?’

‘Patience. There is more to it than that.’ Asvattama said. ‘Indrprastha is brilliant in ways that I can’t begin to describe. The layout, the defences, the sheer beauty…these are things that can be seen, as you already have. But none of that shows you what this place truly holds.’

‘Which is?’

‘What if I told you that this city is a record, a comprehensive account, of all the scientific knowledge set down by the Firewrights?

‘A record…but where… You mean like a scroll?’

‘I mean, the city itself. Do you remember the fountains in the Coronation Hall?

Syoddhan clenched his teeth at the one memory of the Coronation Hall that he could not forget, the reason why, even now, he refused to enter the hall though he would gladly explore every nook and cranny of the city given half a chance. It was where his dearest friend Shisupala had been beheaded, by none other than Govinda Shauri. With effort, Syoddhan brought himself to focus on Asvattama’s words.

‘The fountains in the hall – there are hundreds of them – are each made in a different way; using a different mechanism… Or should I say, using every different mechanism that the Firewrights have detailed or discovered over the years for irrigation, or working grain mills using water, or…well… anything they’ve invented, really. In short, the city is a veritable demonstration of most known Firewright machinery, and some unknown. The beauty of it is how it is hidden while being in plain sight. Like an illusion. And that makes this whole place…’

‘A maya-sabha; a palace of illusions.’

‘Yes. And the greatest illusion of them all is that the Firewrights and their work is lost. Imagine, imagine the legacy of the Wrights left in plain sight, as part of all that is everyday and mundane. Imagine it filling, enriching our lives, though we may not know it. And then imagine a Secret Keeper who continues to work in anonymity, to make sure that this comes to pass…’

‘Did you find it?’ Syoddhan interrupted, something he would not ordinarily have done while Asvattama spoke. This once though, he could not hold back, irritated as he was by how a stoic, restrained man had turned into a gushing youth in front of his eyes. His tone brought Asvattama back to his immediate surroundings.

‘No,’ Asvattama said. ‘No trace of the Naga-astra. But that’s the thing, Syoddhan. There is not a single piece of information, in any form, about any Wright-weapon, leave alone the Naga-astra. I have personally been over every thumb-length of this city and have found nothing, nothing at all

that relates to weapon-making or battle strategy, not even a distant reference.'

'That makes no sense!' Syoddhan said. 'Why give form to nearly all of the Firewrights' knowledge, but leave out the one thing that made them so mighty?'

'Because it made them mighty.'

'Don't be dense.'

Asvattama chuckled. 'It is not for me to criticize our elders. My father – your teacher – and Grandsire Bhisma among them. But the truth of the matter is that those who were part of the Great Scourge destroyed only what they could not take for themselves or that which they did not need. The Kurus, for example, cared little for irrigation mechanisms – after all, your land is one of the most fertile tracts in all Aryavarta. At the same time, to let others benefit from those inventions could reduce their reliance on Kuru – in turn reducing Kuru power. No doubt, our elders have acted to ensure the undiminished glory of your kingdom. Their intentions may have been noble, and this is how they considered their actions justified. Be that as it may, those we reckon as the great rulers of Aryavarta were all leaders of the Great Scourge, or else are their descendants and pupils.'

Syoddhan resented the implications in Asvattama's words, and he let it show. 'Their actions were justified. It is our duty as rulers to guard evil from itself. If we do not take control of the source of great power, we risk it falling into the wrong hands.'

'Like Jarasandha's? He held no affection for the Firewrights, nor did he have any allegiance to the Firstborn. That sufficed for Vyasa Dwaipayana to condone the way he was killed… If it weren't for Jarasandha, a Kuru would have become emperor a long time ago, isn't it?'

'Your point being…?'

'What if the Wrights knew… What if they had the courage to destroy that part of themselves they believed bred hatred and violence, and wanted to leave only that part of their knowledge that added to peace and prosperity. What if Govinda Shauri was no traitor, but one such rebel? Does that not change things completely?'

Syoddhan considered the point. He did not want to admit it aloud, but the proposition did explain most of what Govinda had done over the years. It didn't, however, explain why he would now risk all his plans simply to prove a point in Dharma's favour. Out loud, Syoddhan said, 'What if he wasn't? Would you still want me to make peace with such a man? Or maybe you will! You can't hide it anymore, can you? There is a Firewright within you, there always has been, and now to see Indr-prastha, to see their plan to rise again and come to life… You can't resist the temptation any longer, can you?'

Asvattama's voice was stern when he said, 'We're too old to fight like children, Syoddhan, so why don't you just shut up, and I won't have to hit you.'

Syoddhan stared at the other man for what felt to him like a long time and then let out a tired sigh. His rage of moments ago was gone, and with it the memory of his accusations. As though their conversation had been as before, he continued, 'Old is right. I feel it. I feel it in every bone.' He looked pointedly at Asvattama. 'It has taken me a long time to understand one fundamental truth, my friend. You see, many of those we might reckon as our enemies are not, for they share the same beliefs as we do, they want the same thing as us. Trust me, I know Dharma Yudhisthir from youth, and I could wager my life that no man believes more strongly in Divine Order and our destined role as its caretakers than he does. Yet, he and I have different views on the best means to achieve this end, and it is that difference that men like Govinda seek to exploit. That Dharma allows himself to be manipulated, that his principles are so malleable, is what makes me think of him as my enemy, and a more dangerous one than Govinda Shauri. Does that make sense?'

'It does. Govinda believes in sharing the power of the Firewrights with the masses, while you believe such power is best fettered and kept in control, tempered jointly by the Firstborn and the kings of Aryavarta. It is a difference of principle, but as individuals you are both fundamental in intent. Dharma, on the other hand, claims to share your principle, but is willing to forsake it in order to achieve what he considers greater ends.'

‘Correct. So whose war is this? Dharma’s or Govinda’s? Not that I care about the nature of my enemy, but unless I know who it truly is, planning against them is difficult. Which brings us back to your suggestion that Dharma’s forces will march against Indr-prastha. Govinda was willing to settle for a village when he came to barter peace. That doesn’t sound like a man who aspires to take this city.’

‘That doesn’t sound like a man I’d trust, either.’

Syoddhan said, ‘Clearly, you are not the only one. Sudhakshin of Kashi has already declared that he fights for us. In fact, he wants to know if he should direct his men to Hastina or Indr-prastha.’

‘But you haven’t called for an open muster yet…’

‘Call or not, he has come forward. His men are already marching eastward, and Dasarna’s king has allowed them to pass through his lands – which shows where he stands.’

‘With the Kurus,’ Asvattama said.

‘Or against Southern Panchala, at the very least. But if we want to gather the men here, at Indr-prastha and not Hastina, then it might be better to get them to move through your realm, Northern Panchala.’

‘Hmm. I’d suggest you think further on that. Indr-prastha has one weakness, Syoddhan. It is impregnable, it can withstand siege, it can outlast any enemy. But what it cannot do is support a huge army – which I suppose is another defence in itself.’

‘Surely that is an advantage.’

‘From a military perspective, yes. From a political perspective, however… As it stands, your men and mine form the city’s army, and they are as much as we can manage to have here. If Govinda attacks in Dharma Yudhisthir’s name, he will do so with the might of Matsya and, we should assume, Panchala behind him.’

Syoddhan said, ‘How does that matter? We can withstand them, can we not?’

‘The city can,’ Asvattama said. ‘But your rule will not. With two of Aryavarta’s most powerful nations against you, some for you… What happens when Sudakshin’s men start getting hungry? Or when some other

ally's soldiers begin dying of disease and lack of sanitation? These kings who march to your side do so in the expectation of immediate war, not endless strife. They do it for duty, but also for the spoils from war. How long will they continue to side with you if you can't maintain their men? And once their coffers are empty, as are yours, then what? We – your friends – won't abandon you, Syoddhan, but we cannot be sure how the rest of the kingdoms will react to such a situation. Now do you see? Politically speaking, only a ruler who enjoys great trust and loyalty from his vassals – one who truly rules over united Aryavarta – can hold Indrprastha. It's brilliant!'

'But…' Syoddhan began, but stopped short as the import of Asvattama's words sank in.

Asvattama continued, 'It is like a piece of hot iron. Not everyone who picks it up would be able to hold it. And by refusing to make peace, you have set off this rather impressive trap, and Govinda knows it.'

'Are you saying this is my fault?' Syoddhan bristled.

Asvattama shrugged and met Syoddhan's angry eyes with patience. Finally, Syoddhan turned away. His voice was quiet when he said, 'Much is my fault, yet none of it is, though I could not admit that to anyone but you. By Rudra, Asvattama, you have no idea how liberating it is to just be here for a day to two, away from Hastina. Every day I'm there I feel as though I'm being torn apart, pulled in different directions. Often, I don't know what to do, and so…'

'You do nothing. You say nothing.'

Syoddhan's eyes were earnest. 'Is that wrong? All my life, I have been told that destiny is nothing but Divine Order in action, a higher will manifested on earth for us to follow. So it follows that to surrender to destiny is to surrender to a higher power, to follow Divine Order. All that I have done has been such, I have made no effort to twist events to my whim, but let destiny take its course – with me, with my family…with the Empire. And yet…and yet I cannot help but feel that in ages to come people will not remember me as the man who let destiny prevail, but as one who failed.'

'This bothers you?'

‘It bothers me that it can be so; that doing what is good, what is right, can still lead to perdition and ruin. Would future generations not speak of Syoddhan Kauravya as the hero who stood to preserve the noble way of life as everything came crumbling down around him? Yet I know it is not whether I do right or wrong that will decide how I am spoken of, but the simple fact of whether I have won or lost… Does it not bother you, Asvattama?’

The tall warrior shook his head. ‘No.’

‘No?’ Syoddhan was astonished.

‘No,’ Asvattama confirmed. ‘Just as it does not bother me that in ages to come it is not I who will be remembered as your loyal friend, the man who stood by you through perdition and ruin. But that does not, will not, stop me doing so, Syoddhan. As for what will be said of me – you’re right, that ultimately depends on whether we win or lose.’

A melancholy silence followed. Finally, Syoddhan said, ‘Look at us, speaking of winning and losing as though war were upon us. Posturing, that’s all it will come to. Posturing and waving arms about, and then good sense will prevail. My cousin may be a self-righteous idiot, but he is not a bloodthirsty man. He will not allow war to come upon this realm… You know, I never really understood how anyone could win a war, when it leads to such great loss on both sides anyway.’

‘For such existential questions,’ Asvattama said, ‘it is a philosopher, possibly one of the Firstborn acharyas, that you need to speak to. All I can tell you is this: If it comes to war, you don’t want to make your stand here, at Indr-prastha. You need to meet the enemy at a more strategic location, one where your allies can stand by you, not just in principle, but in fact. You need to stand in command over the single, mighty force that will be the army of united Aryavarta.’

Syoddhan asked, ‘What do you have in mind?’

‘Govinda will call for them to assemble at one place – probably Matsya. He is interested in a display of strength, just as we are. But to show his might, he will pull together his allies’ forces, removing them from their current strategic positions around us.’

‘Then why wait?’ Syoddhan said. ‘We can stop them before they begin to consolidate their forces. We can direct Sudakshin to attack Dhrupad before he marches to Matsya.’

‘Are you sure Dhrupad marches to Matsya?’ Asvattama’s smile was both sad and cruel.

‘No,’ Syoddhan said. ‘You’re right. Southern Panchala is still in play, no matter what ties of blood and matrimony they may have to Dharma. The Grandsire’s influence over Dhrupad is strong.’

‘To throw Sudakshin at Dhrupad may make him side with Dharma, irrespective. We must be patient if your victory is to be absolute. Do nothing but send emissaries and gather troops. And if Govinda, in turn, musters troops to Dharma’s aid, then let him. He will think you have fallen into the trap of trying to create a garrison here at Indr-Prastha. But you will not…Your Highness…’

Syoddhan did not miss the added honorific, Asvattama’s customary way of tempering his commands to make them appear like advice. But that the other man so instructed him did not bother Syoddhan at all. He responded in the same vein, preserving his illusion of supremacy, more as a matter of studied habit than as intent to assert his authority. ‘And where do you suggest we make our stand?’

Asvattama said, ‘Kuru’s Fields. Kurukshetra.’

‘But…the terrain? If we come in from the south, from Indrprastha, does that not expose our line of approach? And what about Jayadrath’s forces: They must march in from the west. Shalya will most certainly march to Dharma’s aid, along the same path… What is the point of secrecy then? The whole purpose of preempting the attack by meeting the enemy at Kurukshetra would be defeated.’

‘It would, unless we had help. Syoddhan, I may not be your best friend, but will you nevertheless trust that I act in your best interests?’

‘Yes.’ It was all Syoddhan could bring himself to say.

‘Then ready your armies.’

21

SEATED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CROWDED DINING HALL AT Kampilya, his father's vassals in their festive finery and best spirits surrounding him, Dhrstyadymn, Crown Prince of Panchala, felt alone. He would have, in an instant, traded each last one of the assembled nobles and every single delicacy to eat and drink that was there before him for a quiet moment with one man: his brother, Shikandin. Over the years, Dhrstyadymn had got over his guilt at having taken from his brother the right to rule Southern Panchala, but it nevertheless bothered him that some things had not changed – for instance, no one in the entire palace had spoken of or asked about Shikandin since the day they had last seen him.

Shikandin had set out directly from Matsya on what Dhrstyadymn knew was a task to muster forces. In fact, the Crown Prince had expected he would soon have to do the same on his father's orders. But then, to his disbelief, Dhrupad had chosen to wait.

'She's your daughter. The rest of the realm goes to war for her, but you won't?' Dhrstyadymn had asked, furious.

His father had been terse. 'And this is my kingdom. I have more to think about and answer for than petty personal grievances.' Gritting his teeth, the king had added, 'My eldest son may well be dead for all the good he has done me. My daughter – she too has brought me no joy. You are all I have left, Dhrstyadymn. I trust you won't disappoint me.'

After that conversation, Dhrupad had gone out of his way to create the impression that all was well in Southern Panchala – entertaining his nobles, inviting vassal lords to visit. Each occasion was marked by an excess of revelry and drink, the aftermath of which were suffered mostly by the

attendants and concubines of the royal palace. Dhrstyadymn turned as one such concubine trailed her slender fingers down his arm. ‘More wine, my prince?’

He smiled and shook his head. She waited in invitation but when it was clear that Dhrstyadymn was not in the mood to be entertained in any manner of her specialization, she moved away. To his surprise, though, she headed straight for Yudhamanyu: Shikandin’s son, if one could still use the filial appellation for a man who held nothing but utter hatred for his father.

It was partly fate and partly Dhrupad’s fault that things had always been this way. Shikandin’s marriage to Dasarnika, the princess of a neighbouring nation, had been a political arrangement. Shikhandin’s mistake, as he had admitted in retrospect, had been that he had not refused. He had been too drunk on power and his status as a prince to realize that deep inside he was already in love with a simple forest-dweller. He had tried to be a good husband, as a matter of duty if not desire, but his love for Guhyaka had been too intrinsic a part of the bigger journey that he had already begun. His lust for power quickly died out, his ambitions faltered and very soon he was a different man, not the mighty prince with a great reign before him whom Dasarnika had married. Consequently, the marriage of political convenience soon turned into a relationship of distrust and hatred. Dasarnika and her father had demanded the marriage be annulled, claiming that Shikandin was not a man and had not been able to consummate the marriage.

The dishonour of such a claim had been too much for Dhrupad to take, and the incident had driven the final wedge into the king’s already tenuous relationship with his son. An enraged Shikandin had eventually succeeded in impregnating his wife, though in a terrible, violent way for which he had never been able to forgive himself. Dasarnika had refused to see him again and returned home to her father. And though she had died at childbirth, her legacy of hatred had continued in the form of Yudhamanyu, her son.

Dhrstyadymn’s first memory of Yudhamanyu was not a pleasant one. It had been some days after he and Panchali had been adopted as Dhrupad’s children, and Dhrstyadymn remembered being in the royal treasury trying to get his head around the kingdom’s taxation and revenues, when he had

heard the sound of crying. Searching, he had found Yudhamanyu, then hardly five years old, sitting in a dark corner of the treasury. The boy was curled up on the dusty floor, weeping uncontrollably, holding a small but well-adorned hair-pin bearing the Dasarna kingdom's emblem close to him. Dhrstyadymn had sat down next to the boy, taken him on his knees and let him cry for a while, gently rocking him back and forth. At length, he had said, 'Come, let's go find your father.'

'I do not have a father,' Yudhamanyu had said, in a surprisingly adult tone, shocking Dhrstyadymn to the core. 'Shikandin is not my father. He is a traitor and a cheat who hurt my mother. He was a woman who went into the forests and met an ugly, one-legged Yaksha, with horns on its head. The Yaksha used his magic to turn Shikandin into a man, and he came back and hurt my mother even more.'

Dhrstyadymn had held the boy close, but had been unable to say anything. Distraught, he had sought out his brother at the earliest opportunity.

Shikandin had brushed off his concerned enquiry. 'Do you believe in karma, Dhrstyadymn, the inevitable circle of life?' he had asked, with a grim smile. 'Then you will see that this is mine. My son despises me the way I have despised my father all my life. But that cannot change. I made my choices; I did what I had to. If, for that, I have to go through my life being hated by my own son, so be it.'

After all these years, Dhrstyadymn now knew the whole story. He saw what it was that drove Shikandin to the forests, how noble his brother was. But he still floundered for the words to tell Yudhamanyu the truth.

Dhrstyadymn felt a touch yet again and was about to shrug it off, irritated, when he heard the voice of Satrajit, the Commander of the Panchala armies. 'Father wants to see you at once. We have a visitor.'

'Who…?'

'Come, see for yourself. You won't believe it. And before you get your hopes up, there is no way this can be anything good…'

His heart sinking, Dhrstyadymn rose to his feet and followed his brother out of the hall. Yudhamanyu joined them.

‘You too?’ Dhrsytyadymn asked, and the younger man nodded in response. The gesture only served to remind both Dhrstyadymn and Satrajit of Shikandin, for despite Yudhamanyu’s best efforts to look as little like his father as he could, including directing the royal barber to cut his hair ‘just like Uncle Drsytydymn’s’, he was undoubtedly Shikandin’s son in more ways that one. And that, Dhrstyadymn often reminded himself, gave him hope. *Someday Yudhamanyu might just understand and forgive his father*, Dhrstyadymn thought, just as the door to Dhrupad’s private chambers opened and he finally saw who their visitor was.

With a silent sigh, he let go of all hope and focused his attention on their visitor: the Grandsire of Kuru, Bhisma Devavrata.

22

KING DHRUPAD WAS A MAN OF CONSIDERABLE PRIDE AND FELT rightly entitled to be so. The Panchala dynasty was as old and honoured as the Kurus, and at one point, generations ago, they had shared a great ancestor. Both the common and the splintered family lines had produced great emperors and many great kings. By virtue of its location, the region around Panchala's capital, Kampilya, was fertile and verdant, and thus capable of supporting a great army – one strong enough to consistently quell all dissidence that arose in the less prosperous mountainous regions in the north of the kingdom as well as the dense forests on its eastern borders. In short, Dhrupad was the mighty king of an old and powerful nation, and he never let anyone forget it, least of all himself.

Except, that is, in the presence of Bhisma Devavrata, Grandsire of the Kurus. Dhrstyadymn did not fail to notice how Dhrupad was muted, subservient in Bhisma's presence. The reasons were steeped in recent history, he knew, though it had taken Dhrstyadymn a long time and some terrible incidents to understand the situation in all its complexity. Despite all its strengths, once, just once, the great army of Panchala had failed to keep rebellion in check – when the same Firewrights who had contributed to Panchala's rise turned against their rulers. And that was when Bhisma Devavrata had come to Panchala's aid, routing the Firewrights, restoring Dhrupad's father Prishata to power. In return, Panchala had set up her armies to join in the Great Scourge, killing, ravaging, raping their way through one village of Firewrights after another. But even that had not been enough to set the kings of Panchala free of their debt to Bhisma Devavrata, and the Grandsire's influence had remained a shadow over their heads.

Dhrstyadymn clenched his fist as it struck him that Panchali's wedding to Dharma Yudhisthir, all those years ago, was equally a result of Bhisma's interventions as it was of Dwaipayana Vyasa's. As for all that had happened since… He forced himself to let go of his anger as both Bhisma and Dhrupad turned to look at him.

'Ah! There they are,' Bhisma said, exuberant. 'Dhrstyadymn, Panchala's future… I say, Dhrupad, your son's skill with astra-weapons is unbelievable. I saw him train when he was at Acharya Dron's hermitage. One warrior like him, in every generation, and all will be well. And this…' Bhisma turned to Yudhamanyu, 'I suppose, is your grandson?'

The words held a distinct hesitation, which was not lost on those present. Yudhamanyu grit his teeth with anticipated shame, as Dhrupad hastily declared, 'He is Dhrstyadymn's son, for all purposes. His uncle, the Crown Prince, has brought him up in his own likeness. He too has trained with astra-weapons. In fact, with heirs like these, I wish we had a couple of Firewrights left, who could make astra-weapons for their use. The Kuru-Panchalas could then rule the world!'

The statement was made partly in jest, but Dhrupad's tone lacked the requisite levity, and so left an uncomfortable strain in its wake. He cleared his throat for lack of anything to say, but Dhrstyadymn took it as a reminder to formally bow to Bhisma Devavrata. Yudhamanyu did the same.

Dhrstyadymn then said, 'You sent for us, Father?'

'I did,' Dhrupad said. 'The Grandsire has some disturbing counsel for us. I wished you both to listen to him directly, and speak your mind on the matter. After all, you are, as he said, the future of the kingdom, of the entire realm.'

'Nonsense,' the Grandsire intervened. 'Nothing disturbing at all. Merely political strategy and that too devised by the master of such situations: Dwaipayana himself. I see you have not declared your support for Dharma Yudhisthir as yet…'

The statement left Dhrupad visibly uncertain as to what was expected of him in terms of a response and consequent action. 'I… we…' he began.

Again, Bhisma cut in. ‘You must declare that you stand with him. Take your armies and march to Matsya or wherever it is that he gathers his forces. You have a little over one akshauhini division, do you not? That is a sizeable army, indeed. Yes, you must do this, at once.’

‘Why?’ The question was clearly on everyone’s mind, but it was the impetuous Yudhamanyu who blurted it out.

‘Do you want war, young man? Do you really want war?’ Bhisma gave Yudhamanyu a condescending glance. ‘I don’t,’ the Grandsire went on, before the youth could reply. ‘In general, I prefer peace to war, and in this instance in particular I prefer peace quite strongly. It is my kin, my children who stand at odds with each other, and I will do all I can to keep Kuru blood from being spilled in a civil war.’

Dhrstyadymn said, mainly to save Yudhamanyu from his embarrassment, ‘So, Grandsire, do you suggest we support Dharma because that would create a balance that is difficult to break? Would it not be easier to stack the odds in favour of Syoddhan, leaving Dharma no choice but to surrender?’

‘Do you see your brother-in-law surrendering? Especially when that *Firewright* continues to whisper in his ear?’

Dhrstyadymn did not know how to respond. There was no doubt that the Firewright Bhisma referred to was Govinda Shauri. He longed to retort, to point out that Devala Asita was an open and welcome guest at Hastina these days, but did not. Instead, he said, ‘And Syoddhan? Is his surrender a possibility? After all, what he did to my sister, what happened to her at the dice game…’

‘Was a regrettable incident,’ Dhrupad finished, making it clear that he would not let personal grievances affect the decision before them. ‘What we should be thinking of now is the future, not the past. The Grandsire makes absolute sense.’

‘It is not a proposal I can take credit for,’ Bhisma gracefully said. ‘As I mentioned, this comes from the one who guides all our consciences, Dwaipayana. Also, I have spoken to your…err…ally, the King of Dasarna. He will add his meagre forces to yours in favour of Dharma Yudhisthir. As

armies go, it is not a large one, but for the count we have one more nation allying with Dharma.'

'But, Grandsire…' The new information seemed to have spurred fresh doubt in Dhrupad. 'What if…that is…what if we do end up at war?'

'Then you will be honour-bound to fight for Dharma. That is a risk we must take.'

'But that means we fight against you and yours… That's impossible. I owe my life, my throne, to you. My son owes you his legacy. My entire dynasty is in your debt. There is no way we can raise arms against you or those you fight for!'

Bhisma laughed. It was not something any of them had seen before, and despite its novelty it was not pleasant. 'My dear Dhrupad, you are the reason I risk war, and if it comes to us, you will be the reason I will fight.'

'Your Highness!' Dhrupad was startled.

'There, there! I meant it in a good way, the best way there is. Look at you, bound by honour and allegiance, our noble code of morality and law. It is because of men like you that Divine Order is maintained, that Aryavarta remains the chosen realm, the noble realm, blessed by the gods. It is that order I fight for, that way of life. But that assurance, I know, does little to assuage your guilt.'

Bhisma reached out to place a still-strong, well-muscled hand on Dhrupad's broad back. It struck the watching Dhrstyadymn that these men, despite their age, were far from spent. For a reason he could not explain, the thought of Bhisma Devavrata as the same force that once drove the Great Scourge sent a chill down his spine. Pushing aside the thought, he forced himself to pay attention to the Grandsire's words.

'…And so, I set you and your children free of the allegiance you owe me, Dhrupad, son of Prishata, King of Panchala. I solemnly declare that I hold you no ill will, for your actions past or future. Indeed, I ask, as your last act of affection and gratitude to me, that you help me implement this plan Dwaipayana has set into motion – for the good of all Aryavarta. Will you do this for me?'

Dhrupad's voice caught in his throat as he said, 'I will do ask you ask, Grandsire. I will ally with Dharma, if you think that will help us deflect war. But neither in dream nor in waking reality will I or any of my progeny raise a hand against you in battle.'

'Thank you, old friend,' Bhisma declared. 'As for battle, well, who can resist destiny? Let us see where our fates take us. But I leave now, with a content heart.'

Dhrupad bowed, and the others followed suit. Bhisma turned to go and Satrajit followed to escort the Grandsire out. They were nearly at the doorway when Bhisma turned back, the action appearing so casual that it clearly was not. 'That man… I trust he will not be any trouble?'

It took a moment for Dhrstyadymn to understand who Bhisma was referring to, but his father caught on at once. 'No, he won't.'

'And how can you be sure of this?'

Dhrupad drew in a sharp breath. There was no warmth in his eyes as he looked at Yudhamanyu and said, 'Because he knows *his son* will pay the price.'

Bhisma was equally sharp in his response. 'He may not care. Not when he has two more sons to spare. Or perhaps, you don't know of his recent reunion with them…?'

'I do. I tolerate his transgressions as long as they remain family affairs. I assure you, if he becomes a larger inconvenience, I won't hesitate to deal with him as required. I…'

Bhisma held up a hand, cutting Dhrupad off. His eyes moved, first taking in a confused Yudhamanyu and then resting, for what felt like a long time, on a horrified Dhrstyadymn. The Grandsire left without another word.

Dhrupad slumped onto his throne with a sigh, while Yudhamanyu stormed out of the room. Dhrstyadymn hesitated, torn between confronting his father and following his nephew. He chose the latter.

'Yudhamanyu!' he called out, as he ran out into the corridor. 'Yudhamanyu, wait! It's not…' he stopped short as Yudhamanyu turned, tears streaming down his face. 'Yudhamanyu, I…'

‘What can you say, Uncle? What can you say that can possibly make me feel better? Yes, I’m a grown man, a tried warrior, and yet…yet…’ Yudhamanyu fell to knees on the stone floor, and then backed up to sit against the wall, his knees tucked close to his chest. It reminded Dhrstyadymn of the five-year-old boy he had once seen and lifted onto his lap to comfort.

‘How does a man carry the burden of such hatred, Uncle? My grandfather, the one I have loved and cherished as my liege-lord and master, thinks of me as just a bargaining counter, a thing to hold the man who sired me accountable. As for my… my father, does he even consider me a son? We never meant anything to him, did we – my mother and I? We were just *things* to him. My other grandfather – my mother’s father – told me, you know. Of the state my mother was in when she returned home to Dasarna. I could never think of forcing a courtesan, but what Shikandin did to his own wife… How can I forgive him?’ He buried his head and his body shook with silent sobs.

Dhrstyadymn furiously willed himself to find the words he needed to explain to Yudhamanyu that no matter what the circumstances of his birth may have been, his father did love him and always had. He wished he could show Yudhamanyu the pain that his father had endured since childhood, and tell him that though none of it condoned Shikandin’s actions it did explain them. Then he realized quite suddenly that he did not have to.

‘You can’t forgive him, Yudhamanyu,’ Dhrstyadymn said, ‘and you don’t need to. But know this: the burden of hatred you carry – your father has carried it since his childhood. He has carried it for us all. Now you know one thing about him, and you two have at least that in common.’

The words had some effect on Yudhamanyu, for he gradually stopped sobbing. ‘How can you…?’ he had said, finally looking up.

He could not finish the question as his words stuck in his throat but Dhrstyadymn understood. He said, ‘Because Shikandin may not have been much of a father to you, Yudhamanyu. But in his own way he has been mine. And I could not have asked for a better one.’

23

THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT: THE MUSTER AT MATSYA WAS indeed an impressive sight. Chief Virat had already ordered in all the troops spread out through the Confederacy, and their numbers were far more than the garrison at the capital could hold. They, along with the others who had come in answer to Dharma Yudhisthir's call, had set up camps around the periphery of the city, till Upaplavya was but a small island in an ocean of soldiers. And now the mighty Southern Panchala army marched towards the city. The advance forces had met with Chief Virat's sons, and were in the process of adding their camps to those that encircled the city, their disciplined movements appearing as though the great serpent Ananta was coiling himself up in preparation to strike.

Those who knew much, such as Govinda Shauri, held on to their scepticism, for to believe that these numbers were enough to force Syoddhan to submit was simply wishful thinking. Yet, it was a beginning, and Govinda was determined to see this through to the end.

Out loud he said, 'I don't want war. I honestly don't. Why is it that no one will believe me?' Govinda finished by setting his face into a stubborn, almost childlike expression that forced his brother, Balabadra, to smile. The occasion felt familiar in many ways: The two of them on horses, looking down from a cliff at the land below, a sense of beginnings and endings, of inexorable change in the air. Their first glimpse of Mathura and the first time they had set eyes upon the huge stone in the sea that would, one day, become Dwaraka had been the same. But there remained a difference, one that lay heavy on both their hearts. This time, there would be no riding down together to meet destiny head-on. There would be no fighting back to

back, no laughing and jesting at the end of a hard day's work. This time, Govinda would ride without his brother.

The fleeting sense of being in another time and place faded as a shrill horn sounded in a signal, and their attention returned to the scene unfolding before them. 'It might be because,' Balabadra said, as he stared, unseeing, at the marching men below, 'you've ended up doing what you said you didn't want to once too often. You didn't want to be Prince of Mathura. You didn't want to be Commander of Dwaraka. And now you say you don't want war. What does that mean?'

'It means,' Govinda said, 'we've lost the ability to distinguish cause from consequence. Of course I don't want war. Just as I didn't want to be prince or commander. Those things were incidental to what I did want. It was a matter of priorities, that's all. I have never believed that war is an effective solution to anything, Agraja. It is, sometimes, the unfortunate consequence of fighting for what is a priority.'

'And now? What is your priority?'

'The same as it was when we left our village as prisoners bound in ropes. Freedom. The right to be, to live, without need for subservience as a justification to exist.'

Balabadra sighed and turned to his brother. He had, in his role as Dwaraka's leader, refused Govinda's request to reconsider their alliance with Syoddhan, but the decision had not been an easy one. A sense of foreboding had made him insist that he would accompany Govinda to Upaplavya, spend what could well be the last carefree days the brothers had left together, and now they had arrived. It was time. For an instant, Balabadra mirrored Govinda's childlike sulk. 'You and your plans. I don't like your plans, Govinda. They are never meant to end well for you if they succeed.'

Govinda laughed. 'Well, they'd end the worser for the rest of us if they failed.'

'And you ask why no one will believe you when you say you don't want war…' Balabadra shook his head. 'Your shoulders are broad, brother, but not broad enough for this burden. Time and again, I've thrown myself heart

and soul behind you, no matter how foolhardy or dangerous I thought your plans. But this…this is beyond imagination, Govinda. Even a god does not have it in him to stand responsible for a decision such as that. And if, Rudra forbid, there should be war, after all, your soul will always bear those bloodstains.'

'All the more reason I need you with me.'

Balabadra shook his head. 'What you've done has left me with far too many questions to answer for myself. I need to decide what I really believe, and then I'll be back. When that happens…'

'Then, you must do as I have done. You must choose for yourself who you'll side with,' Govinda finished.

'Meanwhile, I will pray you find the strength to do what you must. One man for an empire, Govinda. If you can prevent this war, you must.'

'Agraja…' Govinda began, not quite knowing what he wanted to say. Balabadra raised a hand, putting an end to the conversation. With a last, affectionate glance at his brother, he urged his horse on.

Govinda watched him leave till he was just a dot on the western horizon, a lone figure silhouetted against the setting sun. He then turned to the future, to the darkening sky over Upaplavya. Drawing his shoulders back, Govinda urged his horse down the mountainside, towards the city below.

From those who knew little of the events at hand, the muster of armies at Matsya drew nothing but awe, pure and simple.

'By Rock and Stone, do you see that?' Young Kshatradharman sat up as tall as he could in his saddle, as he, Uttamaujas and Shikandin drew up alongside the huge army marching into the camps set up around Upaplavya. The boy had been visibly excited since they had first seen the force from a distance, and now that they were close enough to hear and smell the huge mass of men and horses he could no longer contain himself. 'Look!' he began pointing out gleaming swords and snorting horses to his brother, who listened indulgently to him even as he glanced, concerned, at their father. If Shikandin felt any emotions at all at seeing the army of Southern Panchala

assembled in all its glory, he did not show it. The studied equanimity, however, fell away as soon as they neared the city gates, and a golden hint of pain flickered through his green-brown eyes as his eyes fell on Yudhamanyu, who stood directing the Panchala army to the temporary barracks, receiving the unit commanders and overseeing the muster of the men as a whole.

‘Is that…?’ Uttamaujas asked.

‘Yes,’ Shikandin answered. ‘That is your brother.’

‘Where? Where?’ An excited Kshatradharman turned his attention away from the marching men.

Uttamaujas was terse. ‘There. By the gate.’

Before Shikandin could stop him, Kshatradharman began to wave, trying to catch Yudhamanyu’s attention.

‘Kshatradharman!’ Uttamaujas snapped.

‘What?’ the boy asked, oblivious. ‘He knows about us, doesn’t he? You’ve told him, haven’t you, Father?’

‘Kshatradharman, shut up and settle down right now, or I swear I’ll give you the thrashing of your life!’

‘Uttamaujas!’ Shikandin was unusually sharp; his tone made further words of recrimination unnecessary.

Uttamaujas opened his mouth to protest, but then thought the better of it. He bit the inside of his cheek to fight back tears and pretended to be unaffected, but continued to glare at Yudhamanyu, as though the latter’s presence was the reason for his father’s sudden turn of affection.

Kshatradharman had stopped waving, but the three of them were now close enough to be seen by Yudhamanyu. For a moment, Yudhamanyu was visibly shocked, but then he recovered and stared through them, as though they were not there at all. His attention ostensibly elsewhere, he turned away and then spit, sideways, right in Shikandin’s direction. Then, still without looking their way, he walked into the city. Shikandin did not bother trying to convince himself that the whole matter had been just coincidence. Instead, he fixed his eyes on Southern Panchala’s banner as it fluttered in the desert wind and reminded himself of why he was here.

Dharma Yudhisthir, the man in whose name these events were taking place, greeted the muster with the vague unease of one who knew much but not all. He watched from the low tower atop Chief Virat's palace, as Shikandin and his two companions weaved their way past the Panchala armies and through the city's streets, towards the stables adjoining the royal enclosure. He saw the unadulterated joy on Shikandin's face as he greeted Govinda Shauri, the two friends embracing long as though they had feared they would never meet again. The joy turned to pride as Shikandin introduced his companions, both of whom greeted Govinda respectfully. Govinda, in turn, shared a few words of banter with the two, one of whom, Dharma realized, was just a boy. At Shikandin's insistence, the two men left their horses to the boys' care and proceeded into the palace.

Dharma sighed and turned his attention back to the activity around him. Though he could no longer see Govinda and Shikandin, he knew that by now they had been met by one or the other of his brothers and were being led to Virat's assembly where the first full Council of War was to take place. He also knew that as soon as they entered, they would ask for news of what had come to pass, the most significant of which, someone, probably Dhaumya, would inform them was Shalya's sudden turn of heart. The King of Madra, despite his avuncular affections and assigned promise had finally had little choice but to ally with Syoddhan.

Dharma had not been upset at the sudden betrayal, for he saw that it was anything but. Shalya had personally come to apologize and explain. 'I am beholden to them, Dharma,' he had said. 'In the years of your exile, Syoddhan more than met his role as our overlord; he has cared for my people through bad harvests and severe snowstorms, to the point of helping maintain my armies. Indeed, as he pointed out, it was his leavened bread that they ate as we journeyed eastwards to join you. I am morally bound to him. Forgive me.'

'But Uncle…' Nakul had protested. 'How did you not…'

'Think of this before I gave you my word? I did, and I thought that since he did his duty toward us…well, as an emperor, whether he took the

title or not…and not some favour, then it does not make me gratitude-bound. But, alas, you see the problem with that line of reasoning?'

Sadev had. He said, 'It means you recognized him as your overlord and validated his reign. Now, you have no cause to not ally with us, against him. On the other hand, if you choose to question whether he truly was your overlord, then his deeds were acts of kindness and he deserves your gratitude in turn.'

Dharma had no seen no choice but to set Shalya free of his promise to join them. 'You must fight for Syoddhan. And you must fight to the best of your ability, for it would be dishonourable not to do so. We hold you no ill will, Uncle. We are at this juncture because we are trying to preserve our way of life, the moral code of honour that makes us noble Aryas. There is nothing to be gained by forgoing that honour. Go, and fight well.'

Shalya had looked relieved. 'My allegiance to Syoddhan shall not stop me from speaking my mind, Dharma. To the extent that your cause is a valid one, I shall not stop espousing the same with my words if not my deeds. And I do not think myself failing in allegiance if I give you this one last piece of information: We saw troop movement from the frontier, on our way here. I think it is safe to say Jayadrath brings few men. He and his vassals fear to leave the frontier undefended. It is wise of Syoddhan to ensure the realm's borders are protected, but it does take away that much from his forces. Either he is indeed worthy of being Emperor, or…'

'Or?' Dharma had snapped.

'Or he fears foreign invasion more than he does internal dissent…' Shalya had finished, leaving no doubt that the statement was nothing but a compliment to Syoddhan. Dharma had given no response. With a final apology, the King of Madra had left. That had been yesterday, though it felt to Dharma like a long time ago.

'Agraja…?' Nakul's voice brought Dharma out of his musings. 'They are all here. It is time.' Dharma nodded and made his way to the assembly hall, Nakul by his side.

They entered, and as one the occupants of the hall rose from their seats to greet the True Emperor of Aryavarta, the man whose cause they had

come to support. His earlier misgivings gone, Dharma felt a surge of pride, of warm conviction at the thought that the gods had brought him to this moment for one and only one reason alone: His was the righteous cause.

‘Praise be to Varuna!’ he whispered, adding a further silent prayer to any other gods who might have been listening. With that, Dharma Yudhisthir took his seat at the head of the assembly and called the Council to order.

24

‘WE HAVE ONE AKSHAUHINI DIVISION FROM KING DHRUPAD AND about three-quarters of a division from Chief Virat,’ Dharma began, taking stock of their forces before the council. ‘Some of our vassals from Dakshinavarta have also promised men. I estimate that will add up to another full akshauhini, with over twenty thousand elephants, sixty thousands horses, plus chariot-archers, and of course a hundred-thousand strong infantry. Yuyudhana, you have some men too?’

‘I do,’ Yuyudhana proudly declared. ‘Of course, they aren’t many in number, truth be told; but the tradesmen – the unassigned warriors of Dwaraka – were willing to go to war in my name. Together with my personal guard, they number a little less than half a division. I suppose, if we add Pradymna’s men, that brings us to just about half an akshauhini.’

‘There are that many fighting men in Dwaraka? Haven’t a fair number already gone to Syoddhan?’ Bhim asked, clearly impressed.

Dharma was not. ‘How many Wrights?’ he asked, ignoring Panchali next to him as she instinctively clenched her fist.

‘What?’ Yuyudhana said.

‘I need to know, Yuyudhana…especially in the Narayaniya division that fights for Syoddhan…how many Firewrights are there?’

‘Why don’t you ask Govinda yourself?’

A stillness took hold of the group till Govinda softly said, ‘None.’

It was Dharma’s turn to be stunned. ‘What?’

‘None!’ Yuyudhana tersely repeated. ‘None against us. None for us. Pradymna and I are as much Wrights as your Gandiva-wielding Partha…

We retain the touches of having been guided by one, but are not Wrights in any sense of the word.'

'Fine,' Dharma ignored his tone. 'So your men bring it to about three and a half divisions.'

'Nearly four,' Dhrstyadymn corrected.

'If only Uncle Shalya…' Partha exclaimed.

'He must do what he must do, Partha,' Dharma was philosophical. 'He owes Syoddhan an old debt of gratitude. By law and morality, he can't say no… He must fight for Syoddhan.'

'But we need more men…'

In a low voice, Shikandin ventured, 'I can assure you of a division. There may be more men, but I cannot commit on their numbers right now.'

Dhrupad could not resist and, in a rare gesture, addressed his son directly. 'Where did *you* get so many men from?'

'There are some chieftains in Kalinga and some of the coastal kingdoms, including Pandya, who've given me their word to come whenever I call them to battle. There are also some small vassal nations in Kashi who would rather fight for me than for Sudakshin… Also, I've ordered all my spies back to me – most of them are fighting soldiers and hardy warriors. But I'm short on elephants, if we are to reckon army divisions. I have more horses, some excellent ones, too, but few elephants.'

'That brings us to four then. That's good,' Dharma said, 'but not enough.'

'What is Syoddhan's strength?' Yuyudhana asked.

'At last count, he had nearly four divisions from his allies, and two of his own. We can add Shalya's akshauhini to that,' Dharma said.

Yuyudhana was astonished. 'Four? How did he manage that?'

'Two divisions between Asvattama and Vasusena alone. Then the Narayaniya army of Dwaraka, led by Kritavarman, as well as some more from the Yadu Confederation, led by your cousin, Bhurisravasu. Another half a division from King Sudakshin's old armies. Of course, in that case, the men may be few but who knows what machinations they bring along with them, not to mention what surprises Acharya Dron and Kripa may

have waiting for us.' With great effort, he said his next words, 'We may well be facing an army of Firewrights. Seven divisions of men with their powers, and their weapons and killing machines. Seven divisions of death…'

'And one more from Bhagadatta. That, too, mainly elephants,' Govinda said.

'And then there's Devala Asita…' Partha added.

A dark mood fell over the gathering as each one imagined the horrors they would have to face if it came to war.

'Is there a chance that Balabadra…?' Dharma began, with a hopeful look at Yuyudhana and Govinda.

'No,' Govinda was categorical.

Shikandin bit his lower lip in thought and then said, 'The Kekeyas and Trigartas, too, will fight on Syoddhan's side. Those armies aren't massive, but they're fierce.'

'No wonder Syoddhan refused to make peace. We'd have called him a coward if he'd shied away from war with a force like that at his beck and call.' Dhrstyadymn muttered under his breath.

'Who else remains?' Dharma wondered out loud.

Govinda had the answer. 'The Chedi Kingdom. Dhrstaketu.'

'So one more division to Syoddhan.'

'Not necessarily. It's worth trying to gain his support. He may or may not join us even if we try, but unless we do he certainly will favour Syoddhan.'

'Dhrstaketu? Shisupala's heir?' Bhim was disbelieving.

'As I said, he may come, if you give him the right reason.'

'Which is?'

'Bid him come in the name of the old Emperor – in the name of Uparichara Vasu, his daughter princess Satya and their legacy. Chief Virat stands with us, and that is not a matter to be ignored. Syoddhan will play on his friendship with Shisupala, but my guess is Dhrstaketu would be more swayed by old honour than new loyalties. Once, his realm was home to the Firewrights; his own family sent their sons and daughters to be raised as

members of the Order. He will not have forgotten what they endured, as did Matsya, in those days.'

Chief Virat said, 'I agree with Govinda. It's worth trying. If Matsya explains why we stand with Dharma, it may convince Dhrstaketu to take our side. I'll get one of my counsellors to take a message to him.'

'Very well,' Dharma assented. In a commanding tone, he began arranging the armies. 'Chief Virat and King Dhrupad can lead their own men…'

Virat interjected, proud, 'My sons and my daughter shall march with me. They know my units better than I do.'

Dharma gave a polite but noncommittal nod, and continued, 'Yuyudhana, you have your men, but keep Pradymna ready to take over. I want you available to keep an eye on Dhrstaketu, if he does indeed join us. Shikandin, I suppose your men, too, are best left to you? All right. I hereby appoint Bhim and Dhrstyadymn as commanders of the other two divisions.'

'And I?' Partha asked.

Dharma's tone was kind. 'You have too much on your hands already, Partha.'

Partha looked like he was taken aback, but before he could protest Govinda stood up and stretched his arms out above his head. 'Right. Last point of discussion before we get ready to march. Who is to be Commander? Of the entire army, that is?'

'Surely…' Dharma began.

'It is not advisable, Dharma,' Govinda interrupted. 'We cannot keep you safe if you are in the frontline. Always, there has been and there ought to be a difference between the Commander and the King.'

'I propose the name of Prince Shikandin for Commander,' Bhim said.

'I support it,' Yuyudhana promptly said. He looked around the room, as though daring anyone to raise an objection. Dhrupad and Yudhamanyu were speechless with rage, but Dhrstyadymn was visibly delighted. Shikandin did not react though it seemed to the others that silent words passed between him and Govinda.

Govinda then said, ‘I propose Dhrstyadymn for our Commander. Of all those here who have trained under Acharya Dron, none has done so more intensively or recently than Dhrstyadymn. We need someone who can match the enemy in tactics as well as in courage. I don’t see anyone else here who could do that.’

‘I support the proposal,’ Dhrupad said loudly. Virat appeared to put more thought into the idea, but then, he too indicated his acquiescence.

‘Does anyone object?’ Govinda asked. ‘Bhim? Yuyudhana? Shikandin?’

‘Of course not,’ was all Shikandin said, drawing a relieved rush of breath from his brother.

‘All right. Dharma? Panchali? Nakul? Anyone? It’s done then,’ Govinda declared. ‘Dhrstyadymn is to lead our forces. We march at the earliest. I estimate that should be in about three days from now.’

‘Which is all very well, Govinda,’ Dhrstyadymn said. ‘But where exactly do I lead them to?’

‘We march to Indr-prastha,’ Dharma stated. ‘After all that has always been the plan, has it not?’

‘Yes,’ Govinda smiled. ‘We march towards Indr-prastha. But the White City won’t be so easily sighted, Dharma. Our enemy plays this game as well as we do. The first move has been made and, I must admit, it has been made well. Syoddhan has already set his mustered forces marching out of Indr-prastha. They head north.’

‘What? But…where to?’

‘They mean to stand in our way at the very borders of the kingdom. At Kurukshetra – Kuru’s Fields.’

‘Kuru’s Fields…?’ Suspicion set in, and Dharma flared up. ‘Why did you not mention this as soon as the Council began. Why wait till now?’

‘Because Shikandin caught the rumour of this move as he travelled through Kuru and Surasena to get here. But both he and I know better than to put our faith in drunken inn-talk, so I had Daruka verify the information. You might have noticed, Dharma, that Captain Daruka walked into this room a few moments ago, and he is visibly travel-weary. But all I needed

from him was a single sign confirming our premise. Does that satisfy you? Or do you still think me some spy or puppeteer or such?'

Dharma did not bother to apologize or explain. He swore loudly, 'Yabha! Kuru's fields… But why?'

Govinda shrugged. 'The obvious explanation is that Syoddhan knows Indr-prastha cannot support a large garrison effectively. Or it could be that he ascribes enough value to the city to not wish to risk battle on its grounds unless he has to.'

'We can change our plans. We can attack Hastina instead,' Dharma argued.

'I thought, Dharma,' Govinda pointed out, 'that you meant to attack no one? That no matter what, you would not let this end in bloodshed?'

For a while, no one spoke or moved. Finally, Dhrstyadymn drew on his new position as Commander to ask, 'What do you suggest we do, Govinda?'

'What can we do? We have no choice. In three days' time, we head for Kurukshetra.'

25

‘KURUKSHETRA. IT DOESN’T SOUND LIKE THE STRATEGY OF CHOICE for a man who wants peace. It is, after all, the ideal battlefield – remote enough from all human settlement to not cause wanton destruction and the loss of noncombatant life, yet strategic enough to give the winning side control over Central Aryavarta.’

Govinda did not look up, but continued to sort through the parchments before him as he said, ‘What now, Panchali?’

The room was silent, all the more so for the numerous voices and opinions that had filled it just a while ago during the War Council. The leaders had left, some not as fully convinced as Govinda would have liked them to be. Nevertheless, they were all committed. Already, a clamour had set in outside Chief Virat’s palace as shouted-out orders were executed by the gathered armies to one end: In three days’ time they would march to Kurukshetra.

Inside the palace, however, it was cool and quiet, and Govinda was glad of that. All he could hear was the occasional rustle when gusts of wind teased the corners of the map he had spread out before him and now, Panchali’s light footfall as she walked into the room.

‘What do you mean?’ she said, coming closer.

‘I mean, I can’t remember the last time I did something to your satisfaction.’

Panchali clucked her tongue. ‘I had no idea you were trying to please me, Govinda. I’d have looked more kindly upon you.’

Govinda did not smile, but the strained lines on his face disappeared. ‘I’m too old to try to please a woman and gain her favour, Panchali. What

you see before you is a man domesticated into obedience, a creature of habitual submission.'

'Submission? You? Aren't you the bull that can't be tamed?' She laughed out loud.

Govinda did not join in. He stood up straight and crossed his arms. 'Do you doubt me too?'

'No, I don't doubt that you'd…you'd…'

'That I'd what?' Govinda snapped, finally turning away from his parchments.

'That you'd lay waste to Aryavarta for me…' Panchali dully said.

'You *are* Aryavarta, Panchali. This Empire has been tormented and violated the way you have been. I cannot see the difference between the two anymore. I cannot bear to let it go on. This is rebellion. This is revolution.'

'Spare me your wordplay, Govinda.' Panchali said as she threw herself into a chair and idly reached out for one of the parchments. She studied it briefly and then let it fall from her hand. 'We've had numerous conversations such as this one and we both know where they lead. There is nothing I can say that will change your mind.'

'Then why do you persist?'

'Because I must do what I must do.'

'As do I. But go on. You know I love to hear your thoughts.'

Panchali was solemn. She knew it would come to nothing, but she could not help but speak. 'Then listen,' she said. 'True rebellion takes courage of a different sort. True rebellion takes letting go. Do you have the courage to let go, Govinda, to destroy power rather than claim it for your own, admittedly noble, ends?'

Govinda considered the woman before him, wondering at her strength and courage as he had several times before. He reached out to tuck in a stray curl of Panchali's long hair behind her ear, but the wayward strand soon slipped back on to her face. Govinda pushed it away yet again, this time letting his fingers linger on the skin of Panchali's neck.

He said, 'Do you remember anything, Panchali? I mean, from before the fire… Do you remember who you were?'

Panchali gasped. It was no secret that she and Dhrstyadymn were King Dhrupad's adopted children, the sole survivors of a fire that had taken all traces of their past, including their memories, with it. It was a topic Govinda had taken care to avoid all mention of, even in casual conversation. Panchali had always assumed that he was simply being considerate though, she had thought, excessively so. She now concluded that there was another reason for his recalcitrance on the matter. 'You've never asked me that in all these years, Govinda! You've never spoken to me about it.' She sprung up from her chair. 'You… You know who I am, don't you? You've always known! By Rudra, Govinda, how could you not…'

'Because,' Govinda cut in, soft yet firm, 'because, as far as I'm concerned, you were not born of that fire or made by it. You were unmade; you were reforged.'

'I don't understand.'

Govinda looked into the dark eyes that searched his face for answers. He chose his words carefully. 'We are defined by what we learn, Panchali, by experience and wisdom. The problem is the same experiences that inform and educate us through childhood and youth also bind us. We become biased in ways we don't know. But you… You are pure wisdom, pure knowledge. The fire left you your memory of information, but no memory of your emotions. You knew things, but you had no context for them; you spoke of prosperity and gain, but without any understanding of your own self-interest. Yes, over the years you have changed, but the core of that unmarked parchment, that guileless reason, remains. And that is why you have been special to me, more so after the fire that wrought you than before…' He trailed off, unable and unwilling to finish. At length, he added, 'When this is over, when it's all over, ask me again, and I will tell you. That is, if you still want me to.'

Panchali stared at Govinda. Questions formed in her eyes, not about who she was or where she had come from, because all that seemed irrelevant in the face of the fact that she had once known him or, at least, that he had known her. She wanted to hear him speak of what they had been, what they had shared, she wanted him to confirm that the nameless

bond between them had once had a name, that it had once been beyond question of propriety or fault. But before the questions left her lips she realized that was precisely what made what they now shared all the more precious. A bond that was nameless, formless, undefined, of endless potential, unfettered by systems and scripture. It was the purest affection there could be, not unlike Govinda's love for humanity.

Panchali felt a poignant, solemn joy, fill her entire being. Once, Govinda had told her that she made him believe in all that was good and worth protecting. Now she understood. Willingly, Panchali let go of all sense of self, past and present, becoming nothing more than an idea, Govinda's idea, his hope.

'No, Govinda,' she said. 'I do not want to know. I do not need to know. I think the very fact that you have known but kept it from me, from us all, explains much. I can venture a guess, but I don't want to. I am what I am. It is enough.'

Govinda struggled not to show emotion, though his eyes glistened, moist. 'Panchali, I'd swear you are me and I am you. By Govardhan, it feels like I am looking into a still lake on a clear day and seeing my own reflection. If someone had heard only of my thoughts, my words and did not know who I was, and then one day they met you, they'd think you were Govinda Shauri.'

Panchali said, 'I have no aspirations of becoming Govinda Shauri. But yes, I do aspire to the highest possible devotion anyone will have for him. Does that not deserve truth, as a reward?'

Govinda exhaled hard. 'Then here is the truth you seek. I do not want war. I do not mean to lead us to war. Indeed, I have promised Dharma that I will do all I can to keep us from war. What I want is for all Aryavarta to see, for Dharma and Syoddhan and every man and woman who call themselves Arya to see…'

'See what, Govinda? Two armies under the control of their respective kings? A realm at war for the very notions of hierarchy you claim you want to destroy?'

‘Oh, Panchali. How is it that you ask me such questions, when you know the one thing there is to know about me is…’

‘Govinda Shauri always has a plan,’ Panchali finished. ‘I can’t tell you how good it is to see this arrogant, self-assured side of you again, Govinda, but for this silly notion that I can’t get out of my head – that you can no longer stop this war even if you want to.’

Govinda smiled. ‘I once heard your father tell you the story of Vasudeva Narayana. You will not remember that incident, but perhaps you know the story?’

‘Yes. It is said that Narayana, the Supreme Being, would never forsake Sri, the very essence of the earth.’

‘Remember that, Panchali,’ Govinda said, laying a hand on her head. ‘When I am gone, remember that…’

‘What! Why would you say something like that…?’ Panchali was alarmed.

Govinda immediately shook his head, smiling. He changed his tone, forcing evenness into it. ‘Now, it has been a long day, and it is time we both went to our respective beds. Off you go!’

Slowly, Govinda pulled his hand away from the warmth of her skin. Panchali closed her eyes as she felt his touch fade. When she opened them again, he was gone.

26

‘WHAT, IN BRAMHA’S NAME, COULD BE SO SACRED ABOUT THIS place?’ Dhrstyadymn exclaimed, running his eyes over the huge expanse of land known as Kuru’s Fields.

In the weeks it had taken them to lead the mustered men from Upaplavya to the hills they now stood on, his mood had turned dark, partly under Dharma’s influence and partly due to his own inner confusion. Now they were here, the advance teams having already set up their camp, into which the last of their allies’ soldiers now marched. All that remained was for Chief Virat’s army to arrive, and for its commanders and their personal guards to take their places in camp. The precaution of getting the soldiers to take positions first had been Dhrstyadymn’s – that way, they could avoid any traps the enemy may have set for them at Kuru’s Fields. Contrary to his expectations, there had not been any attacks on the way, nor had any fighting been required for the soldiers to take up their posts. It made him wonder if, like them, Syoddhan too intended to use war as a feint, a threat. *If so, who will win this game of postures, and how?* The question was but one more of the many that haunted him.

‘My ancestor, Emperor Kuru himself sanctified this earth,’ Dharma said, in answer to Dhrstyadymn’s earlier question. ‘They say, those who live after fighting here are the truly blessed.’

‘And those who die?’

‘They go to the celestial realms and are honoured amongst the ancestors.’

‘Supposedly…’ Govinda interjected.

‘After this hell, anything would feel like Indra’s realms,’ Dhrstyadymn muttered. Panchali, a constant presence in their midst, squeezed her brother’s hand in reassurance.

The battlefield, such as it was, appeared remarkably ordinary, but for the fact that both approach and retreat were possible from only two directions. The field was bound on one side by the rocky but verdant hill range that they stood on and on the other by the River Hiranvati. Both approach paths had been taken up by the two armies; the sprawling camps small against the boundlessness of the battleground. Nevertheless, there was something impressive about the immaculately ordered array of tents, equipment, animals and soldiers that filled the plains before them.

The Command Tent, the heart of Dharma Yudhisthir’s war, stood aligned with the centre of the field, though well within their camp itself. In fact, it was located inside the royal enclosure, which would house Dharma, his brothers and their close allies. Around them, the camp was arranged in blocks, along two lines. Lieutenants and seniors leaders flanked the central section on three sides, leaving it open on the side facing the battlefield. The allies’ armies, each now a division of Dharma’s grand army, had their separate campsites around this core. Each of these sites was further divided into housing for the soldiers, stables for the horses and elephants, as well as a small store and an armoury. Kitchens, too, were separate for each unit, and sometimes a single division might have two or three kitchens to feed its soldiers. This was done to reduce the risk of poisoning, whether accidental or intentional. Usually, equipment and vehicles such as supply carts, were arranged around the periphery of each camp, serving as a protective wall.

Towards the battleground, much of the campsite was left unoccupied in order to have adequate visibility and to allow the men to march out of camp quickly. Yet, it was far from unprotected. A series of small camps, comprising musicians, heralds, trumpeters and such dotted the landscape. The various commanders’ chariots were placed in between the camps in specific sequences that together formed a maze and so provided yet another line of defence. At intervals, gates, as well as guard-posts were set up. Those in charge of protecting the camp and those on sentry duty were not

part of any of the divisions, but were to report directly to the Commander-in-Chief of the army – in this case, Dhrstyadymn.

Impressive as these arrangements were, it was what lay to their left and beyond that made the company breathless, though each one was loath to admit it: Dry, despite the river that flanked its southern border, and barren, despite the verdant hills they stood on, to its north, Kurukshetra was a massive tract that spread from west to east, vast enough to make most armies seem but a band of lost children. It was difficult to think of the place as a battlefield, but there was little else anyone ever called it. It had the structured appearance of an arena, but all sport played on this ground was bloody. Legend had it that long ago a lake had filled this entire region but that body of water had been lost to Firewright pride, just like the river that had once run through Matsya. No clear memory remained of the incident, and those who possibly knew enough to confirm or deny the myth were not inclined to speak of it. All that remained of both the vast lake and its tale was a small pond in the woods that bordered a minuscule part of the otherwise dreary field, a token remainder of a long-ago landscape lost against the inevitability that lay before them: A battlefield without compare and, at its far end, the enemy's army, the size of which defied even the most fearful man's imagination.

'By Rudra!' Dharma exclaimed. His voice fell to a whisper. 'Is that really just the seven akshauhini we had expected?'

Govinda shrugged as though he had just been asked whether he thought it would rain later or not. 'At last count, yes. Shikandin's spies confirmed it…'

'And we stand here with four.'

'The same seven and four we had anticipated when we marched out of Upaplavya, Dharma. Nothing has changed.'

'Indeed, nothing has changed, Govinda,' Dharma said through clenched teeth. 'Things have gone exactly as you planned, have they not? This isn't battle you lead me to, nor is it peace. You want me to surrender to Syoddhan, don't you? You want me to lose what little equanimity and respect I have found in all these years. Why? Why do you hate me so; why

do you want to destroy me? Ah yes, but the answer is obvious, is it not? Truly, I cannot decide which lust of yours holds the greater sway – the one for blood or…'

'Don't, Dharma!' Govinda's voice was a malicious hiss. 'Don't say it. Don't think it. That thought is the very end of the world, the fire of Pralaya itself. Once is too many times already, don't think it again.'

Dharma stared, silent.

'Agraja…' Partha made to protest.

'Vathu, Partha!' Dharma ordered. He then glared at Panchali, defying her to retort. It was, however, Govinda's voice that he heard in response.

'Look to the west, Dharma,' Govinda said. 'Look.'

And Dharma turned to look. In the distance, above a low raincloud, rose the golden lion banner of Matsya. 'Virat's army. But…' He stopped short as he began to see what Govinda wanted him to. Soldiers filled the space on the horizon, covered every foot of ground between the ravines to the north and south of the battlefield, their lines extending as far as he could see by the dim light of the sun, obstructed not by dark clouds but by the dust raised by the march of an enormous army. 'But…' This time, his voice held incredulity, not disdain. 'That army must be at least two divisions strong!'

'It is two and a half akshauhini strong, to be precise. You see, I do not bring you to a dishonourable defeat, or to surrender in shame. Nor do I lead you to war, Dharma. I bring you here to make peace on your terms. You, and only you, will decide whether we fight or not. You have my word – I will not counter your decision. But don't ever question my honesty or my intentions again.'

Dharma refused to be cowed down. 'Where did so many come from, Govinda?' he asked, his brows furrowed. 'Virat's army were barely one akshauhini, but it has now swollen twofold and more, and I am sure you are to thank for it. Mercenaries? Killers for hire? Or just robbers and rapists to whom you've promised pardons? How can I not question you? How can I, in all integrity as Emperor, not ask where these soldiers come from?'

'They come from the same place where I once came from, *Your Highness*. These are the farmers and stone-cutters of Matsya. The nation's

true might lies in its forges, in the strength of the men and women who work those fires, and in the strength of those who till its fields and craft and build stone. With them are those I count my brethren – the simple gwalas and farmers of Dwaraka.'

'But… but how did these Yadus not go to Syoddhan?'

'Ah! Every man in Dwaraka is a fighting man but not all are soldiers by profession. Most have other trades but will rally to a cause as a matter of personal choice, as will our women.'

A silence followed, a tense mixture of awe and reluctance. Eventually, Bhim said, 'They are not enough. Syoddhan still outnumbers us two to one. They are not enough.'

'You'll have more soldiers in two days,' Govinda said, without meeting his gaze. 'About two akshauhini from Kashi and the forest realms of Panchala and Kosala. Some Nagas, too, amongst them, I expect, led by Iravan of the mountain lands. Shikandin did not want to make a promise he could not keep, but not once have I known him to fail, leave alone break his promises.'

'But Kashi…? Don't tell me that Sudakshin…'

'Sudakshin fights for Syoddhan, as do his armies. But like the Queen Mother of Kashi, a large number of Sudakshin's people, his vassal lords included, believe in virtues beyond vengeance. They fight for themselves, for something more…' Govinda trailed off, but before any of the others could ask him to explain, he added, 'And before you ask – Don't worry! The Matsyans already bring arms and equipment to fit twice their numbers. The people of Kashi's regions have weapons of their own make, too. As it stands, we have six akshauhini divisions and then some. It's a far cry from the less-than-four we had just days ago and certainly is more respectable against Syoddhan's seven. Dharma, you rallied kings and warriors to your cause, men bound to fight for you in the name of duty. These soldiers,' he nodded to the approaching force, 'are the people of Aryavarta, they are commoners, as you would call them, come to fight for simple things such as right and wrong.'

Dharma said, ‘Against the Grandsire, Acharya Dron, Asvattama… there are countless accomplished fighters in Syoddhan’s army. What is the point of pitting common folk against trained and tried warriors with astra-weapons?’

‘You told me that your duty required you not only to protect all that is good, but also to guard evil from itself. It is why you came this far, Dharma. Have you changed your mind?’

‘I haven’t changed my mind, Govinda. I just can’t help but apply it. Even a child can see that your so-called army is nothing but a mob of farmhands and fishermen.’

‘I think,’ Govinda said, smiling, ‘that you’ll find every farmhand and fisherman, each gwala, twice the soldier you’d expect him to be. You see, there is one more advantage this army of commoners has that I have yet to mention.’

‘Which is?’

‘Warriors and kings do battle for duty and ambition, even greed. But all there is to fight for in this new age is freedom, freedom from the shackles of duty, freedom from destiny and Divine Order, the hierarchy that allows an emperor to wager the lives of others with impunity – be it at battle or at dice. No, Dharma, these people have come to fight for themselves. This is revolution.’

27

VASUSENA RAN HIS EYES OVER EVERY DETAIL HE COULD MAKE OUT of the gathering mass of soldiers in the distance, from his vantage point on top of one of the hills that bound the plains of Kurukshetra. His gaze moved to the distant outline of a group of men on another peak – no doubt Dharma and his men surveying the approaching force with glee. Then he turned away, shaking his head in resignation, but his lack of comment held a clear message for Syoddhan: *I told you so*.

Not too long ago, Vasusena had proposed that they enroll and train those who he claimed were warriors in the own right – the guardsmen who protected each village, who safeguarded harvests and kine, and the swift and deadly hunters who inhabited the forests of Aryavarta. Of course, he had admitted, the fact remained that most of these men were not Arya by birth, but mere commoners, at best Suta-children of Arya fathers and slave or servant mothers. He had, however, argued that the time had come to admit that military prowess was its own redemption, particularly when such skill could change the course of the conflict in the offing. His eloquence had been convincing, and his example conclusive. No one could serve as a better instance for what could happen if his proposal were put into action than Vasusena himself: the son of a charioteer, and now the king of Anga and a renowned warrior.

Despite his passionate arguments, the idea had been rejected. Vasusena had then turned from arguing on principle to suggesting his recommendations be implemented as a matter of prudence. In private, he had told Syoddhan, ‘It is the only way. Do not underestimate the enemy; do not underestimate Govinda Shauri. He is not above turning to mercenaries

or joining hands with some foreign power for his own purposes. And in all fairness, it is not uncommon – Jayadrath, your brother-in-law, is known to employ hired killers. Govinda is not a fool, Syoddhan. He would not march towards Indr-prastha without a plan. That is, if Indr-prastha is his true target.'

In retrospect, it turned out that Vasusena had been right on both counts. Whether or not Govinda had intended to capture Indrprastha, it was clear that he had not been taken aback by Syoddhan's strategy of meeting the enemy head-on at Kurukshetra. That, and now this. An army of commoners. Overnight, Dharma's forces had doubled in number, and Vasusena knew it did not lack for capable leaders. The assessment made him feel more grim, and he finally gave words to his ire. 'I told you so,' he said out loud.

Syoddhan ignored the rebuke, instead turning his own questioning glance to Asvattama, who shrugged. 'You asked me how many warriors; I told you how many warriors. To that number I hold.'

'And if I were to ask you now: How many men? Or wait! How many fighters? Tell me that: how many fighters? I won't have you telling me tomorrow that you did not count women, or young men, or those you considered inferior by virtue of your oversized sense of superiority. *How many fighters?*'

'I'd say six akshauhini. I cannot be sure, because I do not know what numbers come in from the east. I make my estimates given the soldiers Sudakshin has already brought us…'

'The same way you estimated the size of Virat's forces?' Vasusena sneered. 'I told you we should have done what Govinda now has. We should have enlisted all able men, warriors or not!'

Asvattama hissed, 'It was not I who opposed the idea, Vasusena. Nor was it I who feared that an army of commoners would be only too glad to carry a charioteer's son to glory – even see him to the Imperial throne.'

'Why you!'

'Vathu, both of you!' Syoddhan intervened. 'I doubt neither of your loyalties. As for opposing the idea…both of you will remember that it was put to our entire Council of War. The Grandsire…'

Vasusena let out an instinctive snarl at the mention of Bhisma, which made Syoddhan visibly uncomfortable. ‘My friend, I…’ he began, and then turned to Asvattama for help.

Asvattama showed no hesitation. He said, in his usual scathing manner. ‘It is not what the world thinks you are that bothers the Grandsire, Vasusena. It is what a few of us know you to be that bothers him.’

‘And what am I, if not a charioteer’s son?’

The question left a lull. Vasusena sat down on a nearby boulder. Asvattama maintained his expression of snide amusement, but his eyes showed quiet sympathy. This time, it was he who pleaded silently for assistance.

Syoddhan moved forward to lay a hand on Vasusena’s shoulder. ‘It doesn’t matter to me, my friend. Nor does it matter to Asvattama. We stood by you the day these kings and nobles said you could not be a warrior, that you could not be Arya. And, yet, look who you are and where you are now…Your Highness. What the Grandsire fears is… worse. He fears we may lose our legitimacy, our moral ground if the truth about you became known.’

‘Is that what he told you? Bhisma?’

‘Yes.’

‘He does not tell you the whole truth.’

‘Which is?’

‘Ask him yourself. For my part, my loyalty to you is absolute, Syoddhan, but I will not fight as long as Bhisma leads us. I cannot fight under the leadership of one who questions my ability and my intent, not to mention my integrity. Forgive me, my friend. I may be a charioteer’s son to the world, but through you, through your words and deeds, I’ve learnt that honour counts for something. I cannot fight while Bhisma commands us.’ With that, Vasusena walked off, making his way down the hillside and towards their camp.

Syoddhan watched him as he walked away, and then turned to Asvattama. ‘Have him followed.’ he said.

‘But… No, Syoddhan. This is not the time for distrust. It will weaken you, weaken us. Vasusena has always been loyal to you…’

‘As have you? You vouch for his loyalty? You’ve never had enough of putting him down.’

‘Perhaps I’ve changed. War does that to a man.’

‘We are not yet at war.’

‘The prospect of war, then. And you know I am not the only one. Much as your grand-uncle hates Vasusena, he has allowed him to grow to be a force to reckon with. Not to mention that Vasusena is amongst your closest friends. Did you not wonder why? If the Grandsire had truly wanted Vasusena out of the way, would that have been impossible for him to achieve?

‘No. What you say is true. My grand-uncle believes that a man you don’t want as your enemy ought to become your friend at the least, and your brother in all but blood if that is possible. I have not disputed the principle because it served my ends…just as it served yours.’

Asvattama drew himself up to his full, staggering height. ‘If you wish me to speak my mind on this matter…’

‘I do!’

‘Then, look to those who tell you not to trust. Suspicion is a poison that slowly burns away the mind. Look to those who sow the seeds of suspicion in you, the ones who urge you to be cautious beyond need…’

‘Like you? You insist that I follow your advice, though it will send Devala away from the battlefield, from our side, at this crucial juncture? Do you really know what you’re suggesting, Asvattama?’

‘All I know is that it does not take my father’s instructions to be loyal to you. As for Devala…it is no petty task I ask you to send him on. If he is successful the entire course of events will turn in our favour.’

Syoddhan’s confused expression changed into a frown. He willed his face into evenness and said, as though it were unconnected to the matter at hand, ‘Have Vasusena followed, Asvattama. Don’t make me order you. It is not a situation both of us would enjoy. Go.’

Asvattama took a step in compliance, then another. Then he turned to Syoddhan, his implacable mask once again in place. ‘There’s very little that remains to be enjoyed from here on, Syoddhan. Don’t waste your commands on those who serve you out of free will.’ He walked away, following the path Vasusena had taken.

Alone on the crest of the hill, Syoddhan watched as their enemy’s mighty force approached.

28

THE SUN'S FIRST RAYS WERE A WARM GLOW ON THE HORIZON. Vasusena smiled despite his worries. He always found the dawn soothing, reassuring, for he supposed that the otherwise impossible golden darkness was not unlike being inside a mother's womb. In that instant he could forget that he stood on the edge of an enormous battlefield, on the banks of a river that shimmered red in a sign of things to come, for the day had just begun and anything was possible. Yet, the lightness in his heart lasted but briefly, for as the sun's brightness breached the edge of the world, he was bathed in the harsh rays of reality, as always.

The first time he had heard of his father, his father by blood, not the loving man who had reared him, Vasusena had not undertood the true meaning of those veiled words. 'A young man with the effulgence of the sun,' had been the exact phrase. He did not fully remember who had spoken them, or where, for he had been a child, nor had they seemed to hold significance. After all, the kingdoms of the east, Anga included, lived by the sun, and revered and worshipped it as a deity. It was only when he had sought out the Bhargava clan of Firewrights to learn to wield arms with skill – an act of youthful rebellion – that he had heard those veiled words again, and so realized: his father had been a Firewright. But not even his teacher, Bhargava Rama, had been able to give him a clue to the final mystery of his birth, and over the years Vasusena had learnt to make his peace with not knowing the name of the woman who had borne him in her womb. Until now.

After all this time, the temptation had presented itself, and from an unexpected quarter.

‘Thank you for coming,’ Govinda’s voice was a timely intrusion on Vasusena’s thoughts. The Anga king grunted in response. Emotion, not reason, had brought him here.

‘I’ll be quick,’ Govinda continued. ‘Your father’s allegiance, if not his individual identity, is known to you. You must have often wondered how it remained possible for your mother to conceal your birth, your Firewright father notwithstanding. And it could well have occurred to you already that she was a noblewoman of some importance…’

Vasusena interrupted, ‘Either you know my mother’s identity or you don’t. If you do, tell me. If you don’t, then I will leave. I have no time to play games.’

Govinda clucked his tongue. ‘You are being sentimental. You think only of your mother, but not what it would mean to be the son of an …influential woman.’

‘Why should that matter?’

‘Maybe it could help avoid war.’

Vasusena started, then fell quiet as he considered the implications of the statement. He appeared to engage in some internal debate, fighting back the instinctive doubt and anger with his native pragmatism. Then, he said, as though he had made his peace with the fact and all its consequences, ‘You mean to tell me that Pritha, mother to Dharma Yudhisthir and his brothers, is my mother, too?’

‘Yes.’

‘And how would that avoid war? Do you expect me to betray Syoddhan, to change my allegiance just because Dharma Yudhisthir is my half-brother?’

Govinda said, ‘That would be one way of doing it. The other would be to appeal to your ambition and desire; to suggest that since Dharma and the others are King Pandu’s sons by surrogacy, you would be too, by law. That being the case, you stand to claim all rights as the eldest of the six – over the throne of Kuru, over the empire…why, by your own arguments at the time of the dice game, over Panchali too. Imagine, Vasusena, the woman

you've always desired, to take as you wish. Surely that is a prize worth considering?'

It took Vasusena, disgusted as he was by the proposal, a while to meet Govinda's gaze. And then, he saw the disdain in Govinda's eyes and understood the sarcasm in his words. 'If you are trying to provoke me, Govinda,' he said, 'it is futile. Is there anything else?'

'There is the simple matter that this piece of information had bought me a chance to speak with you. I doubt any other kind of message or invitation would have drawn your interest, or stopped you from telling Syoddhan about it.'

'So you tempt me with a secret just for an opportunity to speak with me? What could you possibly say, Govinda? You have already listed all that could tempt me, but none of it does. Neither blood nor ambition nor desire can sway me.'

'But we live in a world where such temptations are well within our means, even our morals. That I can suggest to you that betrayal bears such rewards; that I can promise you the life and liberty of a woman as your payment… Do you not think that wrong?'

'I agree, it is wrong. But these wrongs are not set right by another wrong. My life, my loyalty, are sworn to Syoddhan. You know that, Govinda. Why do you bother asking me to reconsider?'

'I ask you to have compassion. I ask that you consider the woman who has wept every night she has been parted from you, secret tears that she could share with no one. I ask that you not leave her destitute. She has already lost one son – you – she cannot bear to lose another. I ask you to think of the thousands of mothers like her, who will grieve if war is not averted.'

Vasusena could not hide his amazement. 'You want to stop the war?' he asked.

'But of course. My intent was for both Dharma and Syoddhan to see what the might of Aryavarta truly is – not their well-fed vassals and their paid armies, but the people. I wanted them both to see in whose name it is that any Emperor ought to rule. You understand, don't you?'

‘I do,’ Vasusena nodded. ‘In fact, I’d suggested to Syoddhan that we enlist…commoners…as they call them. But he refused.’

‘And that is why he must see it, as must Dharma. But I don’t want the very people I fight for to lose their lives over this. I need your help, Vasusena. I don’t ask you to betray Syoddhan but, please, counsel him as a friend ought to. There will be an offer of peace. Dhaumya will bring him a proposal this very day. Make Syoddhan see what you see. I don’t ask for surrender, I don’t ask that Aryavarta be given to Dharma. I ask that it be given to the people. Is that not right?’

Vasusena fell into thought. The sun had risen low in the sky, and its rays sparkled off river and leaf. Birds had begun to sing and the low buzz of insects drying their night-dew-soaked wings in the sunshine filled the air. The sweet smells of morning rose around the two men.

Finally, Vasusena spoke. ‘You’ve answered many questions I’ve had over the years, including why the Grandsire Bhisma has suffered my proximity for so long. He feared either for the honour of the Kurus, or for Dharma’s claim to the throne. I won’t be surprised if it was the latter more than the former. I suppose that very fact should convince me to help you, and I will – but only as far as I believe it is in Syoddhan’s interests and for the greater good. I assume you will counsel Dharma similarly?’

‘I will. He is eager for peace. Indeed, I’ve held him back, not for reasons of ambition but…’

‘Yes, yes, Govinda. I get it. Clearly you’ve been spending a lot of time with Dharma Yudhisthir, if explaining your actions and spouting reassurances have become second nature to you.’

The statement made both men smile, though Govinda did his best to conceal it out of politeness. Vasusena breathed in deep and let it out in a loud sigh. ‘As for my mother…’ he said.

Govinda said, ‘I understand if you are angry…’

‘Angry? No, not angry…I know too well the price of rebellion. I also know that her eyes have shadowed me, whenever we have met. I… I just assumed… I don’t know what I assumed, Govinda, but I did not think it to be affection. Now I know.’ He grabbed Govinda’s arm, eager. ‘Tell her for

me. Tell her that I do not hate her, for that is not how my parents brought me up, nor is it what I learnt in her womb. As for her loss… Tell her, if there is peace, then I may be fortunate to live as her child, after all.'

Govinda smiled and gestured to the figure that emerged from the woods nearby.

'How…?' Vasusena began as he caught sight of Pritha, but his question was answered as Vidur emerged next to her.

All Govinda said was, 'I shall leave you alone now.'

29

BY THE TIME GOVINDA HAD RETURNED TO DHARMA'S CAMP, THE pleasant cool of the morning had begun to give way to the dry heat of daytime. The weather, however, was the least reason for the muted curse he let out as he approached the Command Tent. A horse, the armour and colours identifying it as belonging to the house of the Kurus of Hastina was tethered nearby. He supposed the steed's rider was already inside. He lengthened his strides to reach the Command Tent as quickly as he could.

The visitor was not one whom Govinda had expected to see there, and when he spoke the name it came as an exclamation rather than a greeting: 'Yuyustu!'

Yuyutsu, Dhritarasthra's son by a palace handmaiden, was younger only to Syoddhan, but his position as a Suta meant that the acceptance and luxurious lifestyle he had enjoyed as a prince of Hastina was more a privilege than a right. Govinda's mind raced over the various possibilities for Yuyutsu's presence, from a kindred sense of outrage on the prince's part for all that he had suffered as a handmaiden's son to the notion, immediately dismissed, that this was a ruse of some sort on Syoddhan's part.

Dharma settled the matter by declaring, matter-of-fact, 'Yuyutsu wishes to fight on our side.'

Govinda said, 'You are welcome.'

Dharma continued, 'He was giving us a count of Syoddhan's armies as they stand. I have no doubt that our enemy had full news of our activities so I did not think it improper to hear him out.'

Govinda did not comment on Dharma's explanation, but turned instead to Yuyutsu. 'Our last reckoning was between seven and eight akshauhini. Are we far off?'

'No,' Yuyutsu said. 'That is Syoddhan's force, as it stands. And it is my unfortunate duty to remind you that an entire division of those seven is made exclusively of elephants.'

'Bhagadatta, King of Pragjya,' Govinda noted. 'He helped us once, long ago, during the Imperial campaign. Perhaps he thought he'd come off worse for that bargain. Or perhaps he finally admits his need for revenge against me. After all, I did kill his father. But I had help then… Eagles against his elephants,' he finished, smiling as he thought of his dear friend, Garud.

'And? Would those eagles not help us now?' Yuyutsu asked, confusion clouding his face.

'No, Yuyutsu. I can't afford to cage those eagles. They believe that they alone preserve paradise on earth, and it is their sacred duty to revive life at the end of all ages. Swyam-bhala or Shambala they call their home, and protect it zealously. Nothing I say or do can persuade them to emerge from their retreat. You see, their cause is larger than ours.'

'Syoddhan has the likes of Acharya Dron and the Grandsire Bhisma on his side. For long, they have been the sanctified custodians of all the Firewright astra-weapons that were recovered…or plundered, as you will, during the Great Scourge. I doubt their arsenal can be rivalled, and that is the singular cause on my mind right now,' Yuyutsu said.

'I do not believe that they will fight against us,' Dharma declared, 'for ours is the righteous cause and that is all that matters.'

'Surely you don't expect the Grandsire to change his allegiance at the last instant?'

'Why not? You are here, are you not? What brought you here, Yuyutsu? Was it the fact that both armies stand well-matched? Or was it your conscience? Whether you call it self-preservation or righteousness, sanity has prevailed, has it not? With such equally placed armies, war is futile and peace inevitable.'

Yuyutsu thought it over and said, ‘Well, I can only hope the others see themselves as sane as you do.’

Dharma scowled, unhappy to have his optimism questioned. He said, ‘Govinda! Those soldiers you promised, from the forests of the east…’

‘Will be here,’ Shikandin interrupted, gruff.

Partha, who had been silent all the while, was not convinced. He said, ‘Is that anticipation or information, Shikandin? I suspect it is the former… And with all due respect, even if you do manage to get an akshauhini of soldiers, which itself is doubtable, how trained are they to fight? If limping dotards and untested boys like the ones you’ve brought along are what you…’

‘That limping dotard is my brother-in-law. Just as Dharma here is.’

‘Are you comparing me to that…’

‘Peace, Dharma,’ Yuyudhana intervened, while Bhim pulled Shikandin back and Govinda laid a restraining hand on Partha’s chest. Yuyutsu, new to the numerous tensions that filled the air, appeared uncomfortable.

Govinda said, ‘Come, Shikandin, Yuyudhana. You too, Dhrstyadymn. Let’s show Yuyutsu around. I’d like to hear more on his assessment of our army as against Syoddhan’s.’ He led the way out of the tent, Yuyudhana and an eager Yuyutsu with him, while the two reluctant Panchala princes followed.

Govinda and Shikandin waited till Dhrstyadymn and Yuyudhana had gotten into conversation with Yuyutsu on how Syoddhan might use Bhagadatta’s elephants, and then fell behind the three men for a more private exchange.

‘Speaking of those men…’ Govinda began, his voice loud enough for Shikandin alone to hear.

‘My people are half a day’s march away. They will be here well before noon.’

‘Excellent! But then, when have you let me down, Shikandin, no matter how high the stakes? Now the last piece of my plan is in place – the added forces are exactly what we need to tip the scales in our favour. We stand, at

this moment, as strong as, if not stronger than, Syoddhan. Peace is not just likely, it is inevitable. Rudra be praised!' Govinda finished.

'It's done then?' Shikandin 'Your plan…it's in place?'

'Yes,' Govinda confirmed. 'Dhaumya will soon take my offer of peace to Syoddhan. Of course, such peace will come at a price, but one that I am happy to pay.'

'Speak for yourself, Govinda. I'm never happy with any barter that you are so eager to make. On the contrary, it makes me nervous.'

'You? Nervous? The man with a heart of mighty rock and cold stone?' Govinda laughed. 'Come now, Shikandin. If anyone has known what I've intended, right from when we met again at Matsya, it has been you. You are the one I relied on to gather together the people of the eastern and central regions of the realm. You are the one who shared my fears, my thoughts, as Dhaumya and then I bore our incomplete offers of conciliation to Hastina – offers that were bound to be refused. You are the only one who knew that I have hidden the truth of what I have wanted, not in innuendo but in plain speech: We prepare for war in order to avoid war. I did not mean for things to be otherwise, except in terms of the outcome…'

'A realm for the people and of the people. A bloodless revolution. Still, not quite as bloodless as I'd like.'

Govinda smiled, consoling, and continued, 'There will be peace, but whether it is the peace we have worked so hard for will depend on you. Just as Vasusena must convince Syoddhan, you must also constantly remind Dharma of the truth – that Aryavarta belongs to its people. They are not bad men, you know, both those Kauravas. They are mirrors of the very system that rules all Aryavarta, of the very structure of our society. Show them the way, and they will lead the rest of their followers. I shall make sure they begin walking down that path, my friend, but I need you to make sure they do not stray from it.'

'I have told you before, and I'm telling you again: I am the wrong man for the task, Govinda. My own father would not heed my advice, why would Dharma listen to me?'

‘You are the only man for the task, Shikandin. They will listen to you. As will our old friends…the Secret Keeper included. You cannot fail. Neither you nor I want the brave men and women who have gathered to fight for their realm, their rights and their freedom, to die in vain. There must be peace!’ Before Shikandin could reply Govinda gave him a pat on the back and moved away. Shikandin watched him for a while. Then, nodding to himself as though he had reached some private resolution, he followed.

30

‘PUT THAT OUT!’

Vidur was startled by the sharp command, but just for a moment. He turned back to the hanging wick lamp he had just lit, kindling the flame till it burnt with a muted glow. He could now see the shadowy outline of the speaker. The man was slouched in a dark corner of Vidur’s private study in the palace of Hastina. Vidur’s eyes drifted to the window beyond, taking in the red and grey skies outside as he considered the possible reasons for the visitor’s choice of his rooms to take refuge in over all the other, more suitable, places in the sprawling palace. Then, resolved to deal with whatever lay ahead, he approached the seated man.

‘I asked you to put that out,’ the man said, his voice less harsh.

‘Darkness does not suit the Secret Keeper of the Firewrights, and certainly not the untimely darkness of an afternoon storm. You’re a man of the light.’

‘So,’ the scholar said, sitting up on the window ledge to face Vidur, ‘you know who I am.’

‘Yes, and you obviously expected me to know. Else you wouldn’t be here. You’ve saved me the trouble of coming to you…’ Vidur took a seat along the wide window ledge, facing the Secret Keeper. ‘I take it this day’s events were to your satisfaction?’

‘What events do you speak of?’

‘I am not the only one who has had news from Kuru’s Fields today. You know what I speak of – Dhaumya’s visit to Syoddhan’s battle camp. With, I hear, an offer of peace that Syoddhan would be hard-pressed to refuse. After all, this time Govinda offers his own head in surrender!’

The Secret Keeper fixed Vidur with a sharp gaze, but did not reply at once. After a while he said, ‘You know, this is what makes all the difference. When Govinda Shauri wanted a man who could influence the affairs of the Kurus, the politics of all Aryavarta, he chose you. The Firstborn, on the other hand, for the same reasons, threw their weight behind Bhisma Devavrata.’

‘I’d say their choice may have been the better one. The fact remains that the Grandsire is at Kuru’s Fields and can directly influence the situation. Me? I’m just a servitor, a man without ulterior motives.’

‘And whom do you suspect as having an ulterior motive? You think Dwaipayana…?’

‘I didn’t say Dwaipayana. If anyone has an ulterior motive here, it would be you.’

‘You think I want war?’

‘I think you are prepared for it. It may not be what you want the most, but…’

‘Are you so sure that I am not pretending apathy in order to ensure that war is deflected, after all?’

Vidur laughed. ‘By Rudra! Conspiracies within conspiracies within conspiracies. Don’t you get tired of it?’

‘Why do you think I’m here? You’re the one man I can talk to who still remains somewhat untangled in these webs.’

‘Then tell me plainly. If you do not want war, why did you let it come this far?’ Vidur bristled.

‘What cannot be foreseen, cannot be feared.’

‘Fear? Why would you want anyone to feel fear?’

‘I want them all to feel fear. Benevolence is an indulgence in these times. I have made my penultimate move, not only so that we shall have peace, but also that we shall have it without slowing down the task that was entrusted to me when I took up my position as Secret Keeper.’

‘I don’t see what that has to do with…’

‘The thing about Govinda Shauri,’ the Secret Keeper said, ‘is that he is never completely wrong. He is too intelligent a man for that. He could have

made the same offer of peace he presents now a long time ago, and it may well have been accepted. But he did not, he let both Dharma and Syoddhan rally their armies, he let them march out to Kurukshetra, all with good reason. There is no doubt, Vidur, that Govinda's strategy of pushing war in order to have peace is apt, not just because it still keeps Aryavarta consolidated – in two camps, if not one – but also because such a huge mobilization of forces serves as a deterrent to would-be foreign invaders. It also means that no one nation within Aryavarta will be tempted to attack its neighbour under the guise of these being tempestuous times, because no nation stands alone. Unity – the same spirit of unity that we worked so harden to infuse into the realm when Dharma's empire was built – is still of value to us.'

'Then why did you not leave Govinda to his devices? Why did you oppose him?'

The Secret Keeper sounded sad as he said. 'Because I no longer trusted him. The world is not a complicated place. To a Firstborn, duty is everything. To a Firewright, reason is everything. But Govinda… Govinda has traded his devotion to reason for something that I cannot understand. He has made it personal. I told him this at Matsya. Why, long before that: I told him right after Dharma Yudhisthir's coronation, decades ago, that he should leave Aryavarta. But, against all reason, he has stayed and he continues to meddle in the realm's affairs. His involvement began to complicate things. It may be that he meant well, but he became a dangerous man, Vidur.'

'And now? Do you still hold to that opinion? Haven't the terms of Dhaumya's proposal proved to you that Govinda never meant to compromise your undertaking, nor did he want war. What he now offers to Syoddhan in return for peace – surely it is an excessive price.'

'Not to him.'

'And to you? To us? Do you think it is too high a price for us to pay?'

The Secret Keeper sighed. 'Ghora once told me that the secret to building a city, a citadel…anything really, is to keep the foundations complex but the structures simple. And that is what we have done. The empire of Aryavarta is built on complex but strong foundations. It is time to

simplify the edifice that stands. Else, in the future, we will be compelled to break it down ourselves.'

Vidur peered out at the darkening sky. Thunder boomed in the distance, deep and ominous. He said, 'Perhaps, Acharya, it is already time to break down the edifice. Kali is upon us. This is the end of an age and of a way of life, with it.'

'And then? I suppose you'll tell me fantastical tales of how Vasudeva Narayana will awaken from his sleep and with some magical power set everything right? My dear Vidur, it is piety to believe in the divine, but sheer folly to confuse it with myth. Myths are made by men, men like you and me…and Govinda Shauri.'

'You're right. Men like you and I make myths, we weave stories to sanctify the life that has been given to us. But not Govinda. Men like him don't make myths; they make destiny.'

The Secret Keeper stared at Vidur. 'You think too much of him,' he said, sharpness creeping into his voice.

Vidur flared up. 'Do you have no gratitude?'

'To whom and for what?'

'To the one who made you who you are. Did you wonder why you were chosen to be Secret Keeper? Oh yes, I know you were told the reasons, and they are not lies, but did you pause to consider the trust, the faith that was placed in you when you were sought out and asked to take up the responsibility? Do you know who convinced them all to place that faith in you? *She* is gone, but the memory of that trust, that faith in humanity, is what now drives Govinda Shauri. It has taken him a lifetime to find the core of it, beyond reason, dispassion and detachment, the virtues that you and he both adore. He acts now from compassion and trust; the same values that made the Firewrights reach out to you all those years ago. The wheel turns, and it is now your chance to mirror the faith that was placed in you, Acharya!'

The Secret Keeper looked confused, a state of mind quite rare for the scholar. He tried to put together what Vidur had just told him. Strange as it was, it made sense to him, and he saw no reason to dispute any of it. Still,

he decided, it changed nothing. ‘Be that as it may, I cannot compromise the task that was left to me,’ he told Vidur, ‘the very reason why I was, as you said, chosen to be Secret Keeper. As for Govinda’s fickle epiphanies – they are not my concern.’

Vidur smiled. ‘I expected you to say that. He – Govinda – was certain you would not waver from your ultimate aim, no matter what. He once told me that your single-minded devotion was your biggest strength, and your only weakness. He hoped that you would remember that.’

‘And in the guise of counsel he sends you to barter for his life? He offers Syoddhan his head and then expects me to somehow intervene and prevent what will ensue?’

The smile remained on Vidur’s face, but when he spoke he sounded melancholy. ‘It was not he who sent me to barter with you. I have no doubt that Govinda is not afraid of what lies ahead, but I cannot bear to think of the prospect… Nor can *she*. It is *she* who seeks to make this barter. Please… Whether you consider this a request from the one to whom you owe your allegiance, or a threat from one who is in a position to throw us into a bigger hell than we can imagine, I shall leave to you. But she asks me to remind you that the title you now bear was once meant to come to her. Even she does not know what turmoil lies ahead, should she decide to make the truth of her origin known…or claim your title from you.’

‘Come now…’ the Secret Keeper began to protest.

Vidur cut him short. ‘If you are so sure of your convictions, I wonder why you felt the need to come here. It is up to you, Acharya. The fate of many lies in your hands tonight. Now, if you’ll excuse me…’ He made his way out of the room, pausing to blow out the lamp he had lit, leaving the Secret Keeper once again in the dark.

Alone in the brightly lit corridor outside his quarters, Vidur gave in to his emotions. He swayed as he stood and then, reaching out, steadied himself with a hand on the smooth marble wall. Drawing what courage he could, he made his way through the palace, into the gardens, and to a small gate that led directly to the woods outside. As the courtier looked around for the

person he had come to meet, a tall figure stepped out of the shadows, leading a horse beside him.

Vidur was blunt. ‘Tell her I have done what I can, Asvattama; not only because I care for her as a daughter, but also because I believe she is right. I do not have Govinda’s shoulders to bear the burden of such a price for peace. Nor do I have her ability with words such as compassion and hope. All I know is that a world without Govinda Shauri does not feel right, and I hope you have a chance to convey my message to her before Syoddhan responds.’

Asvattama was visibly torn between wanting to console the distraught Vidur and maintaining his usual composure. He settled for the latter, crossing his arms across his chest. ‘Syoddhan won’t respond to the peace proposal till my return,’ he said. ‘After all, he is the one who sent me to Hastina to bring him Suka’s counsel on the matter. It is opportune that I carry two messages, not one. I shall do my best to have a word with Shikandin before I arrive at our camp. But all that depends on when Suka calls for me, and what it is he has me convey to Syoddhan.’ He added, his lips curling in a snarl, ‘Does it not seem weird that after all that has happened, you and I find ourselves waiting on these scholars for the sake of those we care about? Perhaps they are the guides of our destiny, after all.’

‘Our destinies, Asvattama. But not Govinda Shauri’s.’

‘That is an assurance I shall accept in the aftermath, Vidur. Whether Syoddhan agrees to peace on these terms or he takes us to war, blood will flow. All that remains is to be seen is whose blood. It is, therefore, not a good time to talk of destinies. Now I must return to the palace and await Suka’s word. In the meantime, pray and prepare for the worst. It might be the best thing to do.’ His voice graver, he concluded, ‘It might be all we can do.’

31

ONE OF THE FIRST AND MOST ESSENTIAL SKILLS ASVATTAMA HAD inculcated during his training as a Firewright warrior in his youth was the art of falling asleep at will and reaching complete wakefulness in an instant. He was alert, though his slumber had been deep, as soon as he heard the first of the footsteps on the smooth marble floor. The harsh clatter of hard wooden soles told him it was a person of the scholars' order and he expected an acolyte had been sent to fetch him.

'Acharya!' he exclaimed and stood up as Suka arrived at the entrance to the rooms set aside for his use at the palace in Hastina.

Suka smiled, perfunctory. 'Let's walk outside. The cold air will help me think.'

The two men fell in side by side as they headed out of the palace into the evening. A persistent wind, a precursor to the chilling rain that would follow, tugged at their robes. 'So…' Suka began, as they walked over the palace gardens, far from the lines of guards who secured the royal quarters. 'Govinda Shauri sends a peace proposal. I suppose it was to be expected.'

'Oh?'

'He's not a fool. He's seen Syoddhan's forces. They all have.'

'And they – Syoddhan and those who stand by him – have all seen Dharma's. Rather, they have seen the thousands who have come in support of Govinda's cause.'

'And what would you say is his cause?'

Asvattama paused, mid-stride, and then continued to walk. 'If I were Govinda Shauri I'd probably use words like revolution and freedom.'

'But you are not,' Suka pointed out. 'So what words would you use?'

‘That depends.’

‘On?’

Asvattama said. ‘The advice sought here is yours, Acharya. If Syoddhan had wished to hear it from me, he would have asked me to speak, not ordered me to serve.’

‘*I* seek your advice,’ Suka said. ‘What do you suggest we do? Or will you say that depends, too?’

‘Well …’

‘It does, I know. At first glance, the solution seems obvious – armies are equally matched, war is but a terrible waste of life, and peace is easily had, if we accept Govinda’s proposal. But, on reflection, things are not as simple as that. If only we knew what Govinda Shauri truly wants. You see, I don’t doubt he is capable of sacrificing himself in a larger cause. But what I cannot see is what the cause here is – does he want peace, or does he want war? Who is to say what is illusion and what is reality? Of course, the last thing we want to risk doing is falling into a trap. He destroyed the Firewrights once. He has also not hesitated to go against the Firstborn, or anyone who defies him.’

‘Is it really that ambiguous? Govinda’s intentions… Do you really question them?’

‘They could be considered ambiguous. Certainly, Syoddhan sees it that way. *Does he not…Acharya*?’

Asvattama did not miss the emphasis in the scholar’s words. He smiled, enjoying the acknowledgement from Suka as he returned it. ‘Indeed, *Acharya,*’ he replied, ‘that is why Syoddhan seeks your guidance.’

Suka laughed, stark and honest. He reached out to trail a hand across an immaculately-pruned garden shrub and considered his next words carefully. ‘If I were Govinda Shauri…’

‘But you’re not.’

‘I’m not,’ Suka affirmed. ‘But *if* I were Govinda Shauri, I’d see that my biggest problem is that no one can quite trust me. And when a man has a problem like that, sooner or later, it is going to disrupt his best-laid plans.’

Asvattama stopped in his tracks as he understood. Suka walked on, turned and said, ‘You have a fresh horse?’

‘Yes, and one more waiting on the way. I’ll reach Kuru’s Fields a little after midnight.’

‘Send word with Sanjaya as soon as you have a decision. Not that I mean to lose sleep till I hear from you, but it would be good to know…’

‘But of course, Acharya.’

‘Varuna watch over you, Asvattama. Ride hard.’

Nodding his acknowledgement Asvattama strode away in the direction of the stables. Suka wandered the gardens for a while longer, enjoying what he could of the gathering storm and the play of thunder and lightning across the red sky despite his heavy thoughts. Then, resolved that there was nothing more he could have done, he headed back indoors.

‘Reality and illusion? What in the name of Yama and Yami does he mean by that?’ Syoddhan set his goblet down with a hard thud and continued to pace about the tent. Asvattama watched him from where he sat, his eyes red and his white robes brown from riding to Hastina and back within the span of an evening. He had, of course, changed horses along the way so as to not lose time, but the speed of his journey had not allowed him the luxury of sleep on saddleback.

‘If I could see beyond doubt what the right thing to do was, would I have asked for his advice?’ Syoddhan continued to rant, pausing to refill his goblet with wine as he spoke. He drained the goblet as he turned to Bhisma, who stared, pensive, at the floor. Impatient and restless, Syoddhan poured himself yet some more wine and resumed pacing. All the while, Asvattama kept quiet with the practised ease of a good friend.

‘And the matter of peace? What does the Acharya have to say about that?’

This time Asvattama said, ‘That he leaves to you to pursue, or not, as you will, Syoddhan. As far as bartering for the life of Govinda Shauri goes, he fears that may worsen the situation. The problem is we have no way of

being sure what Govinda means to achieve. Is the offer sincere? Or is it a trap? Acharya Suka, for one, does not trust Govinda.'

'And you?' Syoddhan asked. 'What do you think?'

Asvattama crossed his hands over his chest. 'If I were Dharma Yudhisthir, I might use the death – no, the selfless sacrifice of Govinda Shauri – to legitimize and sanctify my rule and the rule of my heirs for all time to come. And if I were Govinda Shauri, those are the exact instructions I would leave behind, particularly when I know that my sister's son is the heir in question. But then, I am neither, and I cannot say for sure what Dharma or Govinda intend. It may well be that Dharma has no knowledge of Govinda's actions, or that Govinda's actions are indeed selfless. But neither option helps the cause of Divine Order, the system that has brought this realm its current glory…'

'In that case why not tell me plainly that I am bound to refuse Govinda's offer? All you and Acharya Suka have for me are riddles and veiled words!'

Before Asvattama could reply, Dussasan burst into the tent, followed by the other commanders of Syoddhan's army. 'Yabha! What in Rudra's name is going on?' Dussasan said.

Syoddhan said, 'I had sent Asvattama to seek Acharya Suka's counsel.'

'Counsel? What for? If you ask me, we should say we accept the so-called peace offer Govinda has sent. And the moment that bastard Yadu's decapitated body slumps to the ground, we should attack the rest of them and be rid of them all!'

'Vathu, Dussasan!' Both Syoddhan and Bhisma snapped at the same time. Exchanging glances of pleasant surprise with his nephew, Bhisma signalled to him to continue.

Syoddhan turned his attention back to his brother. 'We fight this war, Dussasan, because Dharma does not deserve to rule. I won't have us making a mockery of it by dishonouring ourselves. Keep your stupid ideas to yourself!'

'Where does that leave us, Syoddhan?' Jayadrath intervened, his voice dripping venom. 'I still don't trust that cowherd. No man, not even a crass

manipulator like Govinda Shauri, would suffer the ignominy of surrender, leave alone propose it as a term of peace.'

'What does it say about us, then, if we accept?' Asvattama muttered.

'What did you say?' Dron snapped, as always critical of his son.

'Nothing, Father.'

Syoddhan, however, had heard, and it reminded him of something else Asvattama had said, not too long ago: *What if the Wrights had the courage to destroy that part of themselves they believed bred hatred and violence, and wanted to leave only the part of their knowledge that brought about peace and prosperity. What if Govinda Shauri was no traitor, but one such rebel? Does that not change things entirely?*

What if, Syoddhan wondered, Govinda was right. It was not Dharma Yudhisthir alone who was the problem, but the very system, the way of the world around them, which had permitted him to act the way he had. Was it not right to tear down such a system than to merely resist one tyrant who abused his power? But could he rely on Govinda to want to do that? Could any man be trusted to decide the fate of an entire realm with selflessness and objectivity? But who then ever could? Did such questions have answers? *Who is to say what is illusion and what is reality?*

Syoddhan started as he caught himself echoing Suka's words. Out loud he said, 'Frankly, what disgusts me the most about this situation is Dharma's cowardice; how he hides behind Govinda Shauri, living or dead. Yabha! It galls me to think of negotiating with such a pathetic excuse for an emperor!'

'Unless we don't.' A voice, hitherto unheard, emerged from a corner of the tent. Shakuni chose his words with a discreet grace, as though he were making a request, not offering advice. 'What if we don't negotiate? And what if we play this game on our terms?'

'How?'

'Reject the proposal of peace. Call Dharma out for the coward he is. Let them come begging to avert war. Let them make that move.'

'And if they don't?' Jayadrath asked.

‘They will,’ Bhisma insisted. ‘I have faith in my grandson Dharma. He will not forsake Divine Order. He will see what needs be done.’

Syoddhan felt a pang of regret, a mild envy that despite the bond he and Bhisma had formed in recent times there was no denying that the Grandsire still nurtured affection for Dharma. He turned away, trying to hide his disappointment while the others continued to argue the matter.

Shakuni said, ‘If they don’t, they don’t. It would be, quite literally, their funeral. And that realization will not be lost on Dharma. He’d be a fool to risk war.’

‘It’s too dangerous a plan, Shakuni,’ Vasusena objected. ‘Have you seen the men who have come to fight, to die, for Dharma Yudhisthir? The people of this realm have had enough of being puppets in the hands of divinely ordained rulers. We have a chance at peace; no, we have a chance at more… a chance at change! We cannot afford to let our suspicion and mistrust destroy that chance.’

‘Quiet, charioteer!’ Bhisma said. ‘Trust you to ignore all thought of Divine Order and duty. What warrior is he who fears war, particularly when he has the upper hand? It is true, I suppose, that we can put the best of astra-weapons in a Suta’s hands but we cannot fill his veins with our noble blood.’

‘Grandsire, just because I desire peace does not mean that I fear war…’ Vasusena began to argue, as politely as he could. Asvattama gave a sigh of impatience, while Jayadrath, Dussasan and Shakuni surrounded Syoddhan and urged him to destroy Dharma and Govinda, and all those who stood with them.

Syoddhan tried to listen, to respond, but as the cacophony of animated debates, protests, justifications and pronouncements filled the tent, he found himself wishing he were elsewhere, in a place free of discord, a place where there was peace, within and without. An image came to him, and he did not know if it was memory or simply wishful imagination, but he thought of a day, long ago, in the palace of Hastina. A bright and sunny day. He had been just a boy on his grandfather’s lap, listening wide-eyed to tales of

valour and glory. His heart filled with longing for a simple life he would never again know, Syoddhan reached his decision.

32

‘I KNEW YOU WERE A STRANGE MAN, GOVINDA, BUT SURELY TO sleep so well-dressed and with your sword at your side is… unusual… even for you?’

Govinda chuckled as he made a final adjustment to the sword-belt at his waist. He turned to Daruka, who was helping him, and said, ‘Thank you, my friend.’

‘Is that all for now, Commander?’ Daruka asked.

Govinda smiled at him and said, ‘That is all.’

He waited till Daruka had left before he turned to his visitor. Panchali stood leaning against the pole near the entrance to Govinda’s tent, her hair billowing in the night breeze that swept down without fail after dusk, from the hills beyond the plain of Kuru’s Fields. ‘I didn’t think I’d be sleeping tonight, Panchali,’ he said, as though it were natural for him to not do so.

‘I’d ask what nocturnal adventures you have planned, but surely your debauched escapades aren’t meant for my ears?’

Govinda laughed, hearty. ‘Oh, admit it! You’d just be jealous if you heard of my adventures,’ he teased as he walked up to her. They stood smiling at each other for a while, lost in shared memories of good times and happy banter. At length, Govinda said, ‘Well? Dharma sends for me, I assume?’

‘Yes,’ Panchali affirmed. ‘We have a visitor. One I think you’ve been expecting, from your state of readiness. Come.’

The two walked in silence to the Command Tent, and entered. Govinda was not at all surprised to find it full despite the late muhurtta, nor was he discomfited by the sombre, mournful expressions on many of the faces.

Yuyudhana and Shikandin both looked angry. The visitor, whom Panchali had mentioned, alone was cheerful.

‘Govinda.’ Dharma stood to greet him. ‘You might know our visitor, Uluka, son of Shakuni of Gandhara. He brings a reply from Syoddhan, apparently to a message that you had sent, with Dhaumya. We…that is…all of us…have heard him and…’

Govinda said, ‘If it is peace on terms you find favourable, accept it… my liege. I promised you that it is not war I drag you into. I also promised you that I would abide by your decisions without question. To that I hold.’

The declaration prompted a wheezing laugh from the waiting Uluka. Govinda glanced at the messenger. For all that was said about Shakuni, he had a grace about him that his son completely lacked. ‘Hold your peace, Uluka,’ Govinda said. ‘You will soon have your chance to laugh. For now, this is Dharma Yudhisthir’s court and you are in his presence. Behave yourself!’

Uluka cut short his laughter and took an instinctive step backwards. Govinda turned back to Dharma and placed his hands on the former emperor’s shoulders. ‘I have always been your friend, Dharma. Even now I believe you are the one chance Aryavarta has, which is why I have done this without your approval. Whatever happens next, I believe that you can set this realm and its people free of the shackles of hierarchy, return to them the fundamental dignity that is theirs.’

Dharma brought his arms up to mirror Govinda’s stance, the gesture evidence that he felt no anger for the other man. ‘You know the message Uluka brings?’

‘I can guess the crux of it. As for the details…as I said, if they are acceptable to you, they are acceptable to me.’

‘You had sent a new proposal to Syoddhan, containing terms that had not been presented before. You asked him to vitiate my wagers on the grounds that I had no right to make them; that my empire was built on the efforts of a traitor, a renegade Firewright, who is an enemy to all Aryavarta. Thus you deem my rule invalid. Is that right?’

‘Yes.’

‘By the same token, you deem the realm and her people free of allegiance to any emperor… No matter how one construes the outcome of all that has happened; no matter who rules, you deem the people free of subservience.’

‘Yes, those were my requests.’

‘You also asked that I be reinstated as King of Western Kuru, as I once had been, in keeping with the wishes of the people of Western Kuru. Once that is agreed to, in my authority as King, I am to denounce, punish and execute this renegade Firewright.’

Govinda nodded. ‘A man who nearly brought this realm to war deserves to be executed. You, Dharma Yudhisthir the just, the righteous, will understand.’

Dharma fixed Govinda with a curious stare. ‘I have a fleeting memory of similar words, Govinda. In fact, they were instrumental in prompting me to claim imperial dominion. It was the very same Firewright who said them then.’

‘Dharma, I…’

Dharma held up a silencing hand. He gently pushed Govinda aside and addressed Uluka. ‘Tell us, once again, Uluka, how Syoddhan responds to these terms.’

Uluka grinned, his resemblance to his father quite distinct in that moment. ‘His Highness rejects them. He rejects your offer of conciliation. He bid me tell you that he is in no mood for barter with eunuchs and cowards who speak of peace under the protection of renegade Firewrights; nor does he have patience for these pretended assurances of surrender and justice. He commands me to say to Dharma Yudhisthir: “Fight, if you dare.” King Syoddhan for one shall not shame himself by making peace with those who have neither courage nor honour.’

‘What!’ The exclamation came from several of those present, including a horrified Govinda.

Bhim snarled and bounded up from his seat, but at a firm glance from Dharma remained where he was.

‘Agraja, maybe if you were to send Syoddhan a message of your own, showing your interest in this peace accord…’ Partha began as Govinda looked, concerned, from one man to the other.

‘Vathu!’ Dharma said, his voice soft but commanding. He then turned to Uluka. ‘Thank you, Uluka. Tell my cousin Syoddhan that we shall meet on the battlefield tomorrow. You will also tell Syoddhan that I mean to face him on the strength of righteousness and righteousness alone. No Firewright will bear arms in my name. Certainly not Govinda Shauri.’

‘Dharma…’ Govinda began, but Dharma ignored him.

‘That is my final decision. Partha, please see Uluka out and ensure his safe departure from our camp. The rest of you: leave. We have a war to fight in the morning, and we must be prepared.’

A stunned Govinda stood as he was, fighting back the sudden, unrecognized desire to let tears brim. How, after all that he had done, all that he had been prepared to do, how had it come to this? Had he misjudged the situation so badly? Uluka had come, exactly as expected, but Syoddhan’s rejection of the peace terms was incomprehensible.

He realized the Command Tent was silent and empty save for him, Panchali, Partha and Dharma. Govinda inhaled in a loud gasp, as though he had forgotten to breathe, and turned to the former emperor. Dharma sat calm and composed on his symbolic throne, waiting for the inevitable.

‘I don’t understand…’ Govinda confessed.

Dharma laughed, his response ambiguous in that it was neither warm nor chilling. ‘Neither do I, Govinda. But I am glad he rejected your terms. Dharma the Righteous, you called me. That is who I am. I once told you that I was duty-bound to stand against Syoddhan, for I alone remained free of allegiance to him. It was why I agreed to your plan, to the feint of war. Even so, I cautioned you against bloodshed, and you gave me your assurance that it would not come to that. You have proved your loyalty and intent by your actions, Govinda. It is not your fault that you have failed, and so I could not have made you the sacrificial animal by spilling whose blood we celebrate peace. I am glad.’ Before Govinda could say another word,

Dharma stood up and left the tent. Partha followed, solemn but for the storm of uncertainty in his eyes.

It took Govinda a few moments to notice that Panchali had remained behind, and a few moments more to register that her behaviour at the beginning of the evening had been quite inconsistent with the turn of events. Not only had she not shown the grim, confused astonishment that most of the others had greeted him with, she had also been positively cheerful when she had met him in his tent.

He turned to her, his gaze accusatory and searing. Her dark eyes met his with certitude.

33

PANCHALI WALKED TO A NEARBY CHAIR, SAT DOWN AND PREPARED to face what she knew would come next.

‘How could you!’ Govinda spat out.

She did not reply.

‘Who else knows?’ he demanded.

‘Knows what?’

‘The one secret you had to barter, the one secret big enough to get the Secret Keeper to intervene. Don’t deny it, Panchali. He alone could have had the means and the influence to ensure that Syoddhan was advised to turn down an offer that was meant to be irresistible, and that too against all counsel to the contrary from those he respects and listens to! So tell me: Who knows?’

‘Vidur.’

‘And?’

Panchali hesitated.

‘And? Speak!’ Govinda barked.

‘Shikandin. He…I…I asked him to help me, and he sent word to Vidur through Asvattama.’

‘Yabha! I swear you lot will be the death of me!’ Govinda swore.

The statement drew a fleeting but unmistakable smile from Panchali. ‘That’s a poor choice of words…given the circumstances.’

Govinda was not amused. ‘And Dhrstyadymn?’

’No. He… I was not sure how he’d react. He’s…confused, these days. I did think of telling Dharma, though…’

‘What?’

‘Oh calm down, Govinda! He’d be the last person to talk about it. I doubt he wishes to share this shameful secret of who his wife was… is… It would, no doubt, tarnish his precious Firstborns’ reputation beyond redemption.’

Govinda strode up to Panchali, face contorted with rage. ‘Do you know what a huge risk you took? And do you have any idea how terrible the consequences will now be?’ His voice was a shout as he continued, ‘One man. Me! That’s all it would have taken but, no, Empress Panchali can’t bear to part with her …’

‘Her what, Govinda?’ Panchali’s tone was chilling. ‘Her toy? Her slave? Her lo…’

‘Don’t be disgusting!’ Govinda let the rage flow out of him in a rush. ‘Then why, Panchali? Why?’

Panchali sighed, as though she had rehearsed the explanation several times over. ‘You told me to remember that Narayana would never forsake his Sri. You told me to remember that when you were gone.’

‘So you…’

‘Wait, listen to me! I do not know from which life of mine this question comes, but whenever I have heard that story I have wondered: What is the point of gods who behave like human beings, sentimental human beings? Narayana kept Sri safely hidden even when the world nearly came to an end, for the celestials and demons were at war for a thousand years over her. It seems irrational, does it not? All he had to do was surrender her, forsake her if you will, and a great number of lives would have been saved. But he did not. Why not, Govinda?’

‘Because, Panchali, to forsake Sri would be to forsake the essence of existence itself.’

‘Charming, grand words. But how was existence saved by letting the celestials slaughter each other, not to mention allowing the demons to torment all creatures?’

‘This argument is futile. You’ve totally spoilt my plan, Panchali.’

‘The argument is the same. What is existence, Govinda? The sum total of mortal, transient creatures who breathe in and out at this instant? Or is it

the concept of life itself? Narayana refused to forsake Sri because she was the essence of existence. But what meaning does that essence have if existence is not an eternal force? Don't you see, without Narayana, there is no Sri. You, in turn, are the symbol of the revolution that will transform Aryavarta; you are the one who has brought us to this. I do not claim that you are some god or hero, but to use your own words, you are a product of Time. As am I.'

'And this is why you…?' Govinda said, incredulous.

Panchali shrugged. 'That, and the simple fact that sacrificing you to stop bloodshed is meaningless. It would not achieve the revolution, the change you want. Peace is one thing, revolution is another. You were either impatient or highly optimistic to think one would lead to the other.'

'Would it not?'

'No, Govinda, not yet. Bringing the people of Aryavarta to Kurukshetra is a display of their power, but not of their intent. They came here for a cause. Don't you think the world needs to see, to hear that cause?'

'And so there must be war?'

'They will blame it on me – call me a vengeful woman. Or on you… but that hardly matters, does it, after all that we have given up?'

'No,' Govinda said. He was less angry, but as yet not fully convinced. 'Once,' he said, as though thinking aloud, 'a long time ago, I gave you up because I argued that to offer to sacrifice that which was so precious was the ultimate duty, the ultimate action of them all. Then, after years, I found you, and I told myself that duty and destiny were but illusions and I would protect you to the end, but…'

'But… Instead, you had me married to Dharma, you made me Empress of Aryavarta,' Panchali said. 'This time because you saw that greater than duty was reason, and reason demanded you sacrifice me in the name of larger good.'

Govinda nodded, 'Sacrifice an individual for a family, a family for a village, and a village for a nation… It was a trade I had considered worthy till you taught me that compassion was greater than reason; that the system we protect must be worth the sacrifice. A system that could not protect you,

one of the people that it was meant to serve, is a failure and so is not worth protecting in turn.'

'And so you emerged from the despair you had descended into after Dharma had gambled the empire away. Compassion brought you out of that pit of darkness; compassion is what made you say that you can no longer tell the difference between Aryavarta and I. And it was compassion that made you prepare to sacrifice me again. This time not for Aryavarta, but as part of it. And this time the sacrifice would be that I would live with the pain of your death, your dishonour.'

'You are Sri – the very essence of existence that had to be protected, no matter what the price.'

'As I said, Govinda, without Narayana, there is no Sri.'

Govinda chose his words carefully, 'We can argue and debate abstract philosophy all night. That doesn't change what you have done. It also doesn't change the fact that I made a mistake. I predicted everyone's actions but yours, possibly because, despite my claim to the contrary, I never did see you as some abstract instrument of humanity as a whole. You were… personal. You always have been. It was a mistake.'

Panchali tried not to show any reaction, but the pain in her eyes was evident as she said in a hoarse voice, 'In that case, it is a mistake you have made more than once. And you know what they say about a man who does the same thing over and over, expecting the outcome to be different.'

'He is called a muhira, a fool.'

'And you, Govinda Shauri, are no fool. You have determined through your life that greater than apathy is dutiful action, greater than duty is reason, greater than reason is compassion. Yet duty, reason and compassion – karma, jnana and bhakti – are all means to an end, a path, a way. What is the destination, Govinda?'

'What do you mean?'

'A gwala, a young boy who did not know these staggering words, understood better than the wise Firewright you are now that no matter what we believe in the Truth is One. It exists beyond these names and philosophies. It exists equally for Dharma and Syoddhan, men who believe

in duty and Divine Order; it exists equally for the Secret Keeper and all the Firewrights, who believed in reason. It exists for us, Govinda, in compassion. You didn't need words to see Truth once. I did not know it, but it was that gwala I have trusted all along. It is whom I trust now. My sole regret in life is that I have not met that boy…' Pausing, Panchali smiled, and continued, 'I don't need to have met him. I have placed my faith in humanity, but faith in the universal becomes meaningless without faith in the individual. I trust that there is compassion in every individual, Govinda…just as you do, whether you admit it or not.'

Govinda raised his hands in admission of the argument, even as he continued it. He said, 'Your faith in the power of the collective is not unfounded, Panchali. But the flaw in your idea is in the assumption that people stay united, that humanity in its entirety can function as a reasoning being. Those who have come together at Kuru's Fields for this cause will be easily torn apart by war. When your farmers and fishermen lie dead, what then?'

Panchali stood up, proud and straight as though the chair she had been sitting on was no less than the throne of Indra himself. She walked over to Govinda and reached out to take his hand in hers. 'And that is why we need you. That is why Sri needs Narayana. Once all this is over I shall let you do as you will, but for now, I ask you, not as empress or queen but as a woman of Aryavarta, to see this through. Make your peace with the present.'

Govinda frowned. 'Your tone is… Frankly, it is not heartening, Panchali. What is it that you know that I don't?'

Panchali laughed. 'A rather peculiar choice of words, Govinda, considering that you remember all that I do not.'

'Some things are a matter of skill, not memory. I have no doubt that you are capable of all that you might have…persuaded…the Secret Keeper to consider.'

'Then trust me again, as you claim you once did. It is but a short while to dawn, and war is upon us. Despite Dharma's injunction, we will need you. We will need that gwala who still hides inside you so you can see for

yourself what you must now do. Find him, Govinda. We will need him many times over before all this is done.'

'He said *what*?' Suka asked, rubbing the remains of a troubled, restless slumber out of his eyes.

Sanjaya felt an inexplicable twinge of jealousy as he took in how charming and youthful the scholar appeared even when woken in the early muhurttas before dawn. He willed it aside and said, 'It's true. Syoddhan refused the offer of peace. And he did so, he claims, in the interest of the Firstborn. He said to allow Dharma's reign a trasenu atom's worth of legitimacy was to question Divine Order on earth. The Grandsire Bhisma, too, agreed.'

A flicker of consternation showed on his brows, and then Suka regained his composure. 'Very well. War it is. But the world that emerges on the other side of the fire of death and doom will be as I wish it to be. Sanjaya, I will need you here, at Hastina. Your task is to relay all developments on the battlefield to King Dhritarastra, as he requests, but I expect you to keep me abreast of all developments. Use the white doves, they are faster.'

'You plan to leave?'

'Yes. In the morning, we shall return – all of us Firstborn scholars – to my father's hermitage. Join us there when this is done, Sanjaya. You know he'll be happy to see you.'

'He'll be happy to see me? With all due respect, Acharya, this… this is not what we had planned.'

Suka was curt. 'Do you doubt me, Sanjaya? Do you not trust me?'

'I do, but…'

'In that case, this conversation is over. Now, let me sleep!'

A reluctant Sanjaya bowed, and made his way out of the room. Suka watched him leave. He shut the door and made his way to the simple reed mat that served as his bed, even in the luxuriant palace of Hastina, but then decided against sleep. He went to stand by the windows and looked out. The rain had passed, and the moon now cast a gentle light over everything in sight. Suka held up a hand towards the silver beams that he knew he

could not hold. He stilled his mind. Either way, he reassured himself, this would end as he had hoped. For all the bargains and barters that had been made this one night, there still remained one last move, the ultimate stroke of Suka's plan.

Give me the present and I will give you the future, Govinda had said, and Suka had been right to accept that bargain. After all, it was the Vyasa who would decide what was to be remembered as the history of Aryavarta; he would determine how the curious and complicated story of these times would be told. And as with every good story, the noble would win. Rather, the ultimate prize gained by those who won would be nobility.

It was why, Suka mused, Divine Order was infallible and their chosen ones always emerged victorious. Those who survived, those who lived to tell the tale, became the gods and their faithful. Those without a voice had no choice but to become demons.

And yet, his inner voice taunted him, *it is on Govinda that you now depend. Both you and he made use of the feint of war, but when the dice were cast your gamble was lost. Now it stands to Govinda to prevent war, in the brief time that remains*.

Suka dismissed the thought, invoking reason to focus on what came next.

Once Syoddhan won the not-quite-war, as he would, Suka would ensure that he and his brothers would be the chosen ones, the symbols of all that was right and good. It would be a simple matter to forsake Dharma and his kin; the five ambitious brothers led astray by a vengeful princess born of fire and sorcery. After all, to chronicle reality in the most appropriate form was a talent Suka had acquired from his father. If only his father had learned, as he had, that when the opponent always has a plan one needs to have two. *Oh well…*

Suka smiled, thinking for a while of the story that these events would make. All else would pale in comparison to that tale of lust and treachery… and death…that would eventually be told. Indulging himself in a loud yawn, he moved away from the window to lie down on his mat for what little was left of the night. He was asleep within moments.

34

GOVINDA DID NOT KNOW WHEN HIS RESTLESSNESS HAD GIVEN way to sleep, or whether he was, in fact, still awake and trapped in memory, but his body felt light and heavy at once, as though he was free of himself but imprisoned elsewhere. He was all of nine or ten, back in the vraja of his childhood. The day was hot and he had spent the morning entertaining himself by scrambling up and down rocky hillocks, having left the cows and bulls in his care to their own devices. Pleasantly tired and sun-weary, he stretched himself out in the shade of a tree, one arm under his head for a pillow, the other instinctively swatting at the determined fly that landed now and then on the dried mud on his feet and ankles. Govinda waited, then and now, for habitual stupor to take him, spill over into the present and make the images in his mind fade away into the dark nothingness of true sleep.

A shrill scream rent the air of the past. The young dream-Govinda was immediately on his feet and running in the direction of the sound. He found the children of the vraja clustered on the verdant banks of the river Yamuna and saw the other figures in the distance running towards them.

‘What happened?’ he asked, coming up on the terrified group.

‘A calf…a calf fell into the river. He was carried downstream by its force.’

‘What!’ a voice Govinda recognized as Balabadra’s came from behind them. ‘What are you children doing here? You know the river is in spate, you were told to stay away from it. Now we’ve lost a calf for nothing…’

Govinda did not stop to hear another word. He ran as fast as he could along the river’s edge, following its flow.

He found the calf beyond a bend in the river. The poor animal was caught in the swirls of an eddy, his eyes wide and nostrils flared with fear, his whining scream-like bleat of terror filling the air. At any moment the water would pull the helpless beast below the surface or, worse, dash him against the sharp rocks that lined the river.

'Govinda, no! Don't be silly!' he heard a shout in the distance. And then he jumped. The last thing he saw before being pulled into the river's depths was the calf's large, mournful eyes.

It had been decades, and Govinda still lacked the words to describe what he had seen in those brown orbs, the emotion he could have sworn was there, as though the animal were capable of a human tongue. Wonder, amazement, hope, despair, caution, joy, terror…all of these, and yet none. It was his own reflection he had seen, but it had not been a true image – for the boy mirrored in the calf's eyes had been smiling, not floundering in the white waters of the river; he had been dancing, not drowning.

Govinda sat up with a gasp, unsure of what it was that had instinctively woken him up. He closed his eyes again and tried hard to remember what had happened next, all those years ago, but the dream did not return, nor did memory. The image of the calf continued to nag at him, as though he had forgotten something he knew to be important.

Drawing in a calming breath, Govinda opened his eyes. Darkness, he saw through the partly-open tent flap, had begun to give way to the red skies that preceded dawn. Having lain awake for most of the night after Uluka's departure, he had, Govinda realized, overslept while the rest of the camp readied to march out. Nevertheless, the sense of urgency, the sporadic bustle of movement around him hinted at something more. He knew what was going on even as he swung out of his bed and let his feet touch the ground. The subtle tremble of the earth, the steady, almost-soundless tremors could mean just one thing. Cursing himself, his turbulent dreams, and everyone and everything else for his not having woken sooner, Govinda slid his feet into his sandals and walked out of the tent, his sword-belt in hand.

The first glimmer of day streaked the horizon. The Command Tent was silhouetted against sun-bruised skies and, in front of it, the royal banners of Emperor Dharma Yudhisthir and his brothers rippled in the breeze: Dharma's bore the sign of a golden moon surrounded by planets, Bhim's a silver lion with eyes of blazing lapis lazuli. Partha's flag had the insignia of an ape, Nakul's was the part lion-part bird Sarabha, and Sadev's banner was emblazoned with a silver swan.

Under the proud flags, the leaders of Dharma's army stood as shadows. Govinda joined them, noting abstractedly that they were all dressed for battle, Panchali included. None, however, turned to acknowledge him, for all eyes, everywhere in the camp, lay on one sight alone.

Across the reddened field, streaming in through the entrance to Syoddhan's camp was a company of marching men – no, this was more than a company, much more. An army. Lines of metal glimmered as they caught the rising sun. Govinda knew each flash was not one but at least a hundred men, each spark just a glimpse of a huge horde. It was now light enough for him to note the fair skin and leather uniforms that identified the men as mercenaries from far lands, but Govinda did not think to dwell on that. All he was aware of, all that filled his consciousness, was the sheer size of this new army. He could not tell how many deep the ranks were, but he knew it would not matter. Even the thinnest of marching formations meant that he stared at an advance force of over two akshauhini divisions of soldiers, with more to follow.

Govinda wondered how it was that Syoddhan had been able to amass extra divisions at this last moment, but then as his eyes fell on Panchali he understood. This had obviously been a part of Syoddhan's plan, a fact that the Secret Keeper would have known. It was why, Govinda concluded, the Firewright leader had easily given in to Panchali's intervention and thus led Syoddhan to reject his offer to surrender himself, in exchange for peace. *She expected something, if not this. That was why she insisted I find my answers before dawn.*

Panchali gave Govinda a pointed look as if to confirm the unstated premise in his mind, but he had no response. Next to him, Partha gasped at

the results of his own, silent calculations of the enemy's strength and staggered back as though bodily struck. Govinda caught the warrior by his elbow and pulled him along as he headed into the Command Tent. Partha did not protest, but followed with limp acquiescence. One by one, the others made their way inside.

'Now what?' Bhim said, sullen. 'That must have been more than three divisions of men!'

'Much more,' Govinda said. 'I'd say three and a half, maybe four. That brings Syoddhan's army to a total of eleven divisions.'

'Eleven!' Partha cried out. 'But…we counted on seven, at the most eight. Eleven akshauhini against our seven? How did this happen? Shalya… Shalya reported troop movements of only half a division from the west and the frontier. He wouldn't lie! Or would he…?' He turned to Nakul and Sadev, angry.

'He didn't,' Shikandin said. 'He was misled, just as we were. My guess is that the half division from the west was just a distraction. We were meant to think these were all the men Jayadrath would spare, when in truth he has brought his entire army as well as the Qamboja forces – nearly two division strong – to fight for Syoddhan. Not to mention that he has had no qualms recruiting mercenaries to supplement his numbers.'

'How did he get them here without us knowing? Your men were acting as scouts…' Partha turned on Shikandin.

'Asvattama must have sought help from the Nagas to bring the men through the forests without our knowledge. Brihadbala, Takshaka's son, fights for Syoddhan, and his foresters could move a mountain through their woods without stirring a leaf – such is their skill, their oneness with these lands.'

'It's a bad decision,' Dhrstyadymn pointed out. 'Jayadrath leaves none to defend the north-western frontiers of Aryavarta, which was the pretext he put forth…'

Nakul snapped, 'Are you mad? Nagas or not, Syoddhan's army is now one and a half times the size of ours! And you're worried about the frontier?'

Panchali began to say something but was cut short by Partha as he, Nakul, Dhrstyadymn and Yuyudhana began to argue among themselves.

In all that tumult, Dharma alone remained calm, as though he were reconciled to the situation at hand. ‘Swasti!’ he commanded, bringing silence to the proceedings. When he spoke his voice was without the least trace of doubt: ‘It all makes sense… Why would Syoddhan agree to peace on our terms, no matter how conciliatory those conditions were, when he could have war and victory on his terms? He must have known… They all must have known. It is the obvious answer.’

‘But…’ Partha protested. His voice was heavy with disappointment and he radiated a sense of doom. ‘How could the Grandsire allow this? And Acharya Dron…?’

‘Don’t you understand, Partha,’ Dharma’s tone was kind. ‘They are duty-bound to stand by Syoddhan, just as I am to stand against him. This is not the time for doubt or denial. Destiny has brought us this far. Destiny will see us to the end.’

‘But, Agraja… Fight Dron? He is our teacher!’

‘I am clear on what I must do, Partha. What you wish to do is your choice,’ Dharma declared. He turned to Govinda. ‘Do *you* still think this is a cause worth fighting for, Govinda?’

‘I thought it a cause worth dying for, Your Highness.’

‘Be that as it may, I stand by my word. You shall not bear arms. Not if my cause must be your cause.’

‘Very well.’

‘Dharma…’ Panchali stepped forward. In response, Dharma held up a hand. She looked from him to Govinda and then to him again. At length, she undid the baldric that held her sword and let it fall to the ground, at Dharma’s feet. She left without saying another word, her eyes filled with tears.

Dharma waited till she had gone. ‘It is settled,’ he said. ‘Give the orders, Commander Dhrstyadymn. Assemble our men in a final muster. May Rudra protect us.’

‘Rudra protect us,’ the others echoed the prayer. Partha alone remained silent.

35

SYODDHAN FOUND THE WEIGHT OF HIS WROUGHT ARMOUR pleasantly heavy, for it reminded him of his strength and his ability to bear the weight, not only of the metal but also of the war for which it was worn. His imposing figure inspired respect from the oldest and most accomplished warriors in his army, including his granduncle, Bhisma. As for the others, his own brothers included, they watched, open-mouthed with awe as he directed his rig up and down their lines in inspection, his mere presence serving to affirm among those gathered on his behalf at Kuru's Fields that they fought for the right side, the right cause and, above all, the right man.

Syoddhan himself remained oblivious to the adulation he stirred, his entire attention on the army before him. Each of the huge divisions was arranged either into functional units of chariots, cavalry, infantry and elephant cavalry, or into smaller tactical units. A full tactical unit comprised one chariot, one elephant, five horses and a contingent of foot-soldiers, all of whom would move together as one cohesive group. It was not uncommon for the division commanders and lieutenants to keep their immediate guard in such tactical formations while the rest of the army fought as functional units. That way, the best warriors could do the most damage. Yet, all those preparations, these subtle elements of warfare paled against the sheer size of the force that stood amassed.

Eleven akshauhini divisions, Syoddhan noted with pride. Not even the famed emperors Hastin or Kuru had been able to draw so many men to their side. Indeed, he felt, a moral battle had already been won. The identity of the true ruler of Aryavarta had been established after all. All that remained now was victory. He smiled as he neared the head of the army formation,

where the leaders were clustered together in meeting. Bhisma, Dron, Vasusena, Asvattama – they were all here, on his side. Whatever distrust or doubt Syoddhan may have nursed before, he let go of now. All he felt was the warmth, the commitment and conviction that throbbed as an irrepressible energy through the entire army.

Banners fluttered in the breeze, trumpets trilled, men and animals alike shone in their armour – cast iron and leather worked with gold insignia for the rulers, silver devices showing rank and allegiance for the captains and lieutenants, and copper markings for common soldiers. Horses, too, wore mail, commensurate with the station of the warriors who rode them. Elephants, valuable as they were, were fitted with the best of mail – panels of armour that covered their torso and throat while allowing them to move freely. The tips of their trunks were unprotected, but a number of the animals had knives or dagger-like devices attached to the ends of their tusks. The lead bulls also wore head plates of gold and metal-sewn caparisons of the most luxuriant silk. The finery, however, would not compromise the safety of the valued animals. Both Bhagadatta, who had brought with him the largest division of elephants, and Syoddhan had made sure of that.

The breathtaking ranks of pachyderms were matched only by the sight of Syoddhan's key commanders themselves, and not just for the sheer prowess and nobility they exuded – for never since the Great Scourge had such a collection of Wright-metal been seen in all Aryavarta. Bhisma, Dron, Kripa and Asvattama stood resplendent in fiery white – from the metal tips of their covered sandals to the crown-like helmet that Bhisma wore. Their weapons gleamed in colours to rival nature – every shade in the spectrum reflected without flaw by their burnished surfaces. Here and there was a flash of gold in a tasteful artistic touch to a quiver-rim or a sword hilt, and occasionally of copper used in the same way. Any edge that could maim, kill, cut or strike was, however, made of Wright-metal. The other commanders too did not lag behind – where their armour was sometimes a mix of iron and Wright-metal, most carried at least some arms that were remnants of the massive hoard that had been acquired rather than destroyed

during the Great Scourge. These weapons were, at the command of the Firstborn, to have been kept safe by the noble rulers who now displayed them. And now, with the blessings of the very same Firstborn, these same weapons would keep safe and protect their noble way of life.

In the past, Syoddhan had not given much consideration to his sword, his own armaments. They had always been treasured heirlooms, instruments with a life and history of their own, once wielded to high fame by his ancestors. To wear them today was a mark of pride in more ways than one, and it made him hold his head higher. With that thought, he reached his place at the head of the army and ran his eyes over the enemy before him.

Dharma's divisions were fewer and comprised mostly infantry, that too of a diverse kind – the soldiers' uniforms, such as they appeared to be, were varied and not all the men wore armour. Elephants were few, but the cavalry was adequate – as adequate as could be, given that Dharma's forces were but a fraction of Syoddhan's.

Turning his attention to the enemy leadership, Syoddhan caught the tell-tale blaze of Wright metal, though in less abundance. Like the Kurus, the Panchalas and Yadus had also kept safe their heritage – the swords and bows of their ancestors. Dharma and his brothers, too, had once enjoyed the pick of Kuru's armouries and had held on to their gleanings when all else had been lost. But beyond the arms in the hands of the best warriors there was no other sign of Wright-craft. Most importantly, Syoddhan reflected, he could not make out the distinct and unique shapes common to astra-weapons. *That still does not mean they have none*, he reminded himself. *After all, Govinda Shauri…*

He let the thought wander from his mind as the man who was its focus came into view. Syoddhan smiled his satisfaction at having been right – Govinda stood at the reins of a rig unlike any they had seen before. Every finger's breadth of it, any surface that was not wood, shone white, and the vehicle itself stood as a stark reminder of the Firewrights' most celebrated creation – their metal. The rig's makers had not bothered to decorate it with gold or coloured stones and the singular concession to relief was the crimson banner that fluttered from the rig's flagpole. Syoddhan could

imagine how light and swift the vehicle was compared to all the others on the battleground, especially when it was led, as it now was, by Govinda's famed silver-white stallions: Shaibya, Sugriv, Megha and Balahak. The horses were decked in armour made of Wright-metal, as was the warrior they served: Partha Savyasachin. Gandiva, the great bow, flashed as lightning as he raised it and twanged the string in a sign of readiness. The bow, they said, had been named after its ability to strike fear in the heart of enemies by the very sound it made.

Syoddhan did not look to his own men to see whether that was true or not, but the twanging set off a rallying roar from Bhim that was taken up by the rest of Dharma's army. Yet, there was a lack of vigour, a perceptible slowness to Partha's movements, which made him seem far from ready or rallied. Before he could comment on the matter to the others with him, Syoddhan found his eyes drawn again to Govinda as the white rig moved out of formation, leaving the rest of their army behind.

'Do you think they are advancing to challenge us?' Dussasan said, next to him.

Syoddhan did not reply, all the more to not encourage the amusement in his brother's voice, and kept his eyes on the fast-approaching rig. He had not noticed it the first time around, possibly because he had rarely seen Govinda arrayed for war, but he now noticed that Govinda was not at all dressed as a warrior of his stature, not even, in fact, as a common soldier ought to be. He carried no weapons, wore no armour; instead, his upper robe was crossed over his chest, running diagonally to each shoulder and then down to his waist and around it. Like all the others, he wore his antariya shorter and tighter. His hands were empty, save for the horses' reins.

'What in Hara's name…?' Syoddhan started, looking to the others around him for a possible answer to the obvious question.

Shakuni replied, 'Well, Dharma did say to Uluka that he would not let Govinda fight. Still, that conniving scoundrel has wormed his way on to the battlefield, I see. Hai! I wouldn't trust that man to stay true to his own mother.'

‘Shakuni is right, Syoddhan,’ Jayadrath added. ‘We must be careful. For all we know he hides his arms in the rig and means to use them when we least expect it. I have no doubt that he feasted the best on the remains of the Great Scourge.’

Dron said, terse, ‘Such caution is unnecessary, Jayadrath. For my part, I still have faith in Partha. He is the son I never had, and I know well that his conscience will not allow for this war. And all it will take is a hint of reluctance, the slightest hesitation on his part for Dharma to also see reason.’

Syoddhan did not respond, but he and Asvattama exchanged a look, confirming that they were of one mind with each other – and with Acharya Suka. The war would indeed stop before it began, but the only man responsible for that would be Govinda Shauri.

‘What do we do now?’ Dussasan asked, impatient, as Govinda and Partha came to a halt at the centre of the battlefield. Surrender or challenge, whatever it was that Govinda had in mind, this was the moment for it.

Syoddhan stared for a long while at the two dark-skinned figures on the silver-white rig before he said, ‘We wait.’

36

IT HAD TAKEN, GOVINDA NOW REMEMBERED IN WAKING, THE long and laboured efforts of half the men in the village, the strong Balabadra included, to somehow loop a rope around him and the calf and pull them out of the Yamuna's raging currents.

As soon as his feet touched the ground Govinda had felt a not-very-hard but still telling rap of knuckles on his head. It was followed by a strong, open-handed slap on the same spot. The first, he knew, was from Balabadra and the second from his father, Chief Nanda.

'You stupid fool!' the Chief had begun. 'You could have drowned! You should learn to pick your battles, Govinda. You can't just do as you please! The men have had to abandon their herds just to rescue you! Our bulls must be spread all over the countryside by now! It will take us two days to find and bring back all the animals; that is, if one of our noble lords doesn't decide to take them for his own barns or hunt them down for sport first. See how much trouble you've caused! What were you thinking? Muhira!'

Nanda had moved away, leaving Balabadra to continue in the same vein, and each villager who had gathered added a few words of his own as they led a shivering Govinda and the traumatized calf back to the village. Govinda had not dared to argue; he did not speak a word till later, when he was safe and warm in his mother's arms. Yashoda had taken the calf, too, into her keeping, and the animal lay nearby, his large head sticking out from under a coarse blanket as he stared, content, at Govinda.

A fresh lot of complaints had accompanied Govinda being handed over into his mother's custody, but she had let the villagers' ire wash over her with a smile. Only when they were alone had she asked her son, 'Why did

you jump in, Govinda? What were you thinking?' Her voice had held neither anger nor pride, neither recrimination nor wonder. It was a voice without judgement, a voice that knew and understood.

He had told her the truth. 'I didn't think, Mother. I jumped, that's all.'

Yashoda had smiled. 'You were one with the calf, Govinda. You were one with all Creation. It is not an emotion you can hold on to, nor an action you can repeat. It is a state of being, a state beyond mura – ignorance. Perhaps I should have named you Murare… One who conquers ignorance.'

She had continued to talk about things that the young Govinda had not quite understood. Finally warm, and worn out from the day's happenings, he had let out a loud yawn and fallen asleep, his head on Yashodha's lap.

At that moment, on the hallowed ground of Kuru's Fields, Govinda wanted nothing more than to find once again the peace he had known then. His eyes were on Gandiva, Partha's bow, his mind in disarray at the improbability of where he saw it now – the weapon, stunningly wrought of silver-white Wright-metal, lay inert on the dust of the battlefield. He stared at it, letting the feeling of helplessness, of incompetence, both swallow him and fill him at once. Partha's movements seemed blurred, but Govinda could not tell whether it was because the other man found it difficult to move, or if it was he who could not see clearly through his daze. Laughter rang loud around them, though a part of his mind told him that it came from the direction of the enemy, far away. The sound echoed through him as an inexplicable shiver.

Willing himself to speak, Govinda formed the words: 'Partha… what… what are you…?'

Partha's voice was a suffocated wheeze. 'I cannot do this, Govinda…'

'Partha…'

'I can't. Don't you hear me? I can't!' Partha shouted. He began pulling at his quiver strap, his hands trembling. 'This is madness. I… This…this was a mistake. Look at these two armies. Look at their forces. What folly was this!'

'Partha, you cannot give up now…'

Partha was taken aback. He asked, softly, ‘Isn’t this what you wanted, Govinda? Isn’t this yet another part of your plan? You, the man who was willing to give up his life for peace… How can you stand in my way now? I am with you, Govinda! I have always been on your side. Listen to me… We can still see this through to the end you have wanted. If I give up then Dharma will give up, they will all give up. But maybe it is not about giving up, Govinda. Maybe this is the ultimate act of courage, to say and do what no one else will.’

For a moment, Govinda wanted nothing more than to agree. He could not ignore the rush of relief he felt at the thought that peace could be had, after all. It was a balm for all fears, a pleasant feeling that he knew Dharma and the others would be happy to embrace. But he did not know what to say, or how.

Partha commanded, ‘Take me back to the camp. I’m not going to fight! Syoddhan can accept this as surrender if he wishes, or else he can fight this war alone. I will not resist him.’

War. The word felt bitter on Govinda’s tongue; it made him want to vomit, retch till he was empty of all flesh, one with the blood-crusted earth, endless in its redness like a dream that would not fade. He felt as though he were some carrion crow flying over his dreamscape, gorging on the flesh of those who would die. He was black and red, and around him was darkness and blood, and he no longer knew where he ended and where the ravaged world began. *Partha is right. This is my one last chance. We can stop this war before it starts if we turn back now*. He drew in the reins, intending to bring the horses around. Dwaipayana’s voice, old and familiar yet new in its vigour, spurned him, spurred him on.

Yes, Govinda. Now you see? You cannot defy the gods! Divine Order is imperishable; it is the way of the gods. You cannot change this system. You were always doomed to fail. Turn back. Turn back now.

Yet they stayed where they were, as though anchored by the voice that followed. Deep inside Govinda’s soul, Panchali spoke, her earnestness a reminder of what they had worked so hard for, the principle for which they risked this war. *You must do what you must!*

But how? Govinda's mind raged. *And what is the point? I did all I did for the people of Aryavarta. But I have failed. Between slaughter and subjugation, what am I to choose? If I turn back now, surrender unconditionally, it only affirms the power of the system; it asserts Dharma Yudhisthir's authority to decide with impunity the future of nations, of people, of those who trusted him and came to die for him. It would be the dice game all over again. It would be the end. I have failed. I tried to change things and I failed. It is over*.

The same sense of despair and hopelessness that Govinda had wallowed in for years after the dice game began to swathe him in its folds once again. He tried to fight it, reminding himself of the trust that others had placed in him, of his friends and his brothers, of Panchali, of Philista and her sacrifice. But where he could hold off the dejection and anguish, he could not deny the futility of their faith or that their sacrifice had been in vain. His vision blurred with an amorphous pain and he felt unsteady on his feet.

Holding on to the side of the rig for support, Govinda closed his eyes, the rush of thoughts in his head drawing him into unfathomable depths, just as the river had drawn him in that day all those years ago. He remembered the water entering his nose and mouth, his lungs; he had tried to swim, to surface, but the current had been too strong. Through the water, the afternoon sun had appeared far and dim, and the depths below inviting and cool. His arms had burned with the effort of trying to stay afloat; his chest had been on fire. His sight had dimmed, his eyes closing of their own accord, but he remembered one last thing from before the memories blurred into a murky darkness – a gangly limb prodding him over and over, forcing him to open his eyes.

That day, Govinda had seen hope.

The people of his vraja had always said that he had saved the calf from drowning, but Govinda knew it had been the other way around. That day he had seen the ultimate destination.

Why did you jump, Govinda? He remembered his mother's calm question.

Today he had the answer, the one answer to all questions: No one person can save the world, leave alone a single calf. But the fact that we each try, against all odds, is what the world is worth saving for. And we do what we do, not for the world but because of who we are. We are humanity.

Taking a deep breath, Govinda said, his voice stern and commanding, ‘Pick up your bow, Partha. It is time to fight.’

37

‘FIGHT?’ PARTHA SPAT OUT. ‘WHAT FOR? KILL MY OWN BROTHERS, my teachers, my family and friends; all for the sake of…of what? What remains of Aryavarta, if there should be war? We… You wanted to change the system, Govinda, but now we stand on the brink of shattering it. By my birth, my destiny as a Kuru, I am sworn to protect these lands, its people. This war will destroy the system; it will destroy those who protect the system, as well as those the system is meant to serve. What then is left to fight for? How can you expect me to fight when I know that it leads to our doom, to Aryavarta’s ruin? I…’

Unable to resist the darkness that sucked him into its folds, Partha slumped down and buried his head in his hands. ‘How can I explain my fears, my pain, Govinda? How can I explain to you what I feel… No. Enough!’

Partha’s body wracked with silent sobs, as Govinda watched, open-mouthed. A thick stillness settled over the battlefield, and it seemed to him that he could hear every question, fear and hope that hung heavy around him and he knew what it was to be each living creature that gazed upon the moment. Then, breaking clear through the silence, he heard his own voice, first as speech and then as song.

‘Despair, doubt, fear, yet none of these – that is how you feel, is it not, Partha?

‘Search, for
the reason why
the meaning to

the meaning of
all that is within
without the
boundless bordered
by Illusion.

‘Lose, yourself to find
yourself in what you are
not, where is the truth
of who you are,
when you are not? Which is
the ocean, what is
the drop, where is
the ocean within the drop?’

Govinda laughed. ‘Ah, Partha. You can take the boy out of the vraja, but I guess you can’t take the gwala out of the man. I once used to sing more than I spoke. I feel like that lighthearted boy again, after so many years…’

Partha whipped his head up, aghast. ‘Light…lighthearted? Look around you, Govinda. This is a battlefield, not some hillside pasture!’

But Govinda did not heed him. He sang again:

‘Die, to live, to not
live, to not die, to
speak wordless
truth, use tongues of
silence. I, a word, is
every word that is and is
not, the mirror to the
mirror image of shadows.’

Govinda paused, the agony in Partha’s eyes reminding him of the gloom he had battled an instant ago. Then he watched with renewed conviction as the agony turned to doubt and, finally, to determination.

At length, Partha wiped his eyes and said, ‘And what of my kinsmen, Govinda? What of the entire Kuru clan that now stands thirsting for the blood of its own?’

Govinda said, ‘And what of those who have gathered here in Dharma’s name to wage his war? Have you asked them why they have come here, what they want? Or are their lives and wishes yours – yours and your brothers’ – to do with as you wish; to gamble away once again? This is the greater tyranny, Partha. We are part of the tyranny if we go forward on this path. Everything, everything I have done to bring us, all of Aryavarta, to this has been for one reason – so we may say that there is a quality inherent in each of us that no ruler, no emperor, no lord can take away with or without due cause. There is something sacred in us that must be respected and worshipped, if divinity is to have any meaning of relevance. Call it freedom, call it self-respect, self-determination…words are but bodies for us to house ideas in. But the nameless soul, the idea, is what I ask you to fight for!’

‘That is politics. I need principle. Give me one good cause, Govinda.’

‘Principle? Cause? I could give you four, Partha.

‘I could tell you to fight because it is your duty, because there is no greater sin in the world than to walk away and do nothing when something is ours to be done. To surrender now would set you free from responsibility but it would be the most selfish act. Fight, then, without fear of consequences, be selfless in your duty.

‘I could tell you to fight because reason demands it. Life and death are just illusions. We stand here on this field because Time has brought us to this juncture. We are but the product of millennia, the result of an efficient universe that we perceive through our capacity for reason. And reason demands that the world around must now change. Be the instrument of that change, Partha.

‘I could say fight out of compassion, for that is what makes us both human and divine. To stand against what is wrong, to protect the weak simply because we can and must, to say “Enough!” and stand up for what we believe in – that is how we live on from age to age.

‘I could say fight for any of these reasons, Partha. Better than inaction is action guided by duty, greater than duty is reason, and greatest still is compassion. But these are simply the means to the ultimate reason of them all. And so I would tell you: Fight, not because we are human, but because we are humanity, we are creation itself; because duty and reason and compassion are just different ways in which we seek that oneness and act in concordance with it. If you know that oneness, if you are that oneness, what need then of explanations, of scripture and moral code, of Divine Order and hierarchy? Reach into the oneness inside you. Surrender to the force of creation that flows within, and do what you will without fear or favour, without bond or obligation, with detachment and yet with love. Fight!’

Still, Partha hesitated.

Govinda understood. He reached out to embrace Partha, and his voice shook as he spoke, his tone holding love, not only for the man before him but also for the truth in the words he said. ‘Compassion is the meaning of action, as are reason and duty, but it is an illusion that we, or our motivations, cause things or are affected by the consequences. If passion is free of attachment to cause or consequence, isn’t that reason, even duty? Let go, my friend. Let go of the ego but claim yourself. Be one with everything, float on the sea of illusions but remain untouched by its depths like a leaf on the waters. Resistance, too, is maya, an illusion that comes from thinking that we are the cause of things or their effect. Can you see yourself as more than Partha? Then you will see the Universe not as a thing, but as a living being that balances itself.’

Partha’s eyes held surreal wonder, as though the blackness within him blossomed, as he watched, into myriad colours. His eyes flickered, uncertain, over the world around him. It was the same, yet it was not. The darkness now held light, just as the meaning of light emerged from the beauty of darkness, and somewhere beyond battlefields and cities and rolling pastures there was a space neither empty nor filled, where opposites played like children while the truth of what lay beyond watched over them, a proud, doting mother. Slowly, he pulled himself up on his knees, his gaze now fixed on the man before him. ‘Who are you, Govinda? Who are you

that you can speak this way, that you can be both the Eternal Universe and Govinda Shauri?'

Govinda laughed, the sound ringing over the battlefield. He breathed in deep of the indescribable sensation that filled his pores – an ecstasy so pure and real that it made the greatest joy seem like a pale shadow in comparison. He saw himself reflected in Partha's eyes as large as the Universe and as small as an atom; he was all of the elements at once: wind, earth, sky and water. He was fire, a force with the splendour of a thousand suns, and he knew it to be the force of creation, of the eternal Brahman, of infinity, as though he were a creature with a multitude of eyes and ears and stomachs but a single heart and a collective soul – the force of humanity housed in a million bodies.

Immeasurable, indestructible, he was that which lived on beyond death, everlasting – for the compassion he embodied was a quality that creation could never be bereft of. And so he was incorporeal, without beginning, middle or end, but he was also human, only human, many humans, beyond creed or identity, beyond race and nationhood and birth and nobility. He was at once the million drops that made up humanity and also the single ocean that was humanity itself; an ocean that was ablaze, like the great conflagration that burned at the end of every age in which all was destroyed and reborn. He was the Primordial Being, manifested here and now as Time, the inevitable and the external. This was his true form.

Govinda's next words were neither speech nor song, nor a chant. They were truth; eternal, inexorable.

'I am the substance. I am the instrument through which I seek to serve the substance.

'I am also the reason why I fight for that substance…

'We, eternal, a fleeting
moment, finite body
battlefield fears
consequence. Embrace
the dark to end

tyranny of light
and begin all time,
endless existence.’

Govinda quietened down as he realized Partha was staring at him in alarm. ‘Our choices make us who were are, Partha,’ he said. ‘That, which exists is Reality. That which doesn’t exist is Potential. When Vasudeva Narayana awakes at the end of the age, it is said that things as we know them must come to an end, for he is the unknown, he is unfettered Potential. For all that is known, there’s something as yet unknown even to Existence itself. And that is why Narayana fascinates us – Nara-ayana, the sleeping man, is nothing but the awareness of balance, of the process of balancing that is the living Universe. And under those illusions sleeps the preserver who protects all that exists, the Universe with all its good and bad in balance…

‘We act, Partha, because we *are* the living Universe, we are change itself. Through aeons and aeons, I will be there, and so will you. This is greater than you or me; it is as great as Brahman itself. But that incomprehensible vastness is the atom, the spark inside you as you make your decisions now, as you act. We make choices, choices that lead to this, and this leads to that, which leads to this other and thus to change, to a new balance. The new balance in its own time will result in yet another imbalance, and so on. In every era, epoch and age, the cycle goes on. This is not the last battle that Partha and Govinda will fight!’

Partha remained still, though his mind churned with Govinda’s words. Slowly, he became aware of the rising sound of jeers from the enemy’s ranks. ‘The only thing I understand now,’ he confessed, ‘the only trust I have is in you, Govinda.’

‘And that, Partha, is no less an act of choice or divinity than when the Primordial Being chooses to come into Existence. To be human is to trust in the Divine, and to be Divine is to believe in humanity’s potential. Trust in me, and fight.’

Partha stood up, but his bow remained lying in the dust of the battlefield. Govinda smiled, leapt off the rig and bent down to pick up the weapon. He handed it to the archer with a wink that belied the depth of all that they had just shared.

‘Fight.’

With a long, meaningful look at Govinda, Partha Savyasachin took up his bow.

When the Gandiva sounded again, it did so in clear challenge.

Syoddhan looked up as the twang of Partha’s bow rang across the field. Partha’s posture, his movements left no further room for ambiguity or hope of his surrender. Syoddhan’s gaze moved once again to fall on Govinda as he wondered once more what sort of a man was Govinda Shauri that he could lead thousands towar, shoulder the responsibility for so much death and bloodshed? The answer came at once, stunning him with its simplicity. Men and women, with their limited sense of self, their egos and the duty it bound them to, were capable of such impunity. Govinda was more, and yet less. He was an instrument of time and humanity.

As am I.

It was all Syoddhan needed. He asked Bhisma Devavrata. ‘Grandfather, are you still with me? From this point on, there can be no turning back.’

Bhisma seemed to have reached some personal conclusions of his own, for he briefly considered the battlefield before saying, ‘I am with you, Syoddhan.’

‘Acharya?’ Syoddhan turned to Dron, then to Kripa. ‘Brothers? Friends?’ He met their gaze one by one, waiting till each of them nodded. He did not care what the causes for their convictions were, only that they had them.

‘All right,’ Syoddhan said, ‘then war it is. Enough of politics and posturing. Reassemble the troops and return to camp. At daybreak tomorrow, we fight. Kill them. Kill them all. Remind the world what it means to be Arya. Remind the world what it is to walk with the gods.’

Part II

1

THE SUN WAS A BALL OF FIRE, ITS HEAT BRINGING FORTH NO CHEER – only memories of old hatreds and past grievances. A constant rumble filled the air; the incessant twangs from thousands of bows, some in tandem, some in succession, the collective sound adding to an eerie symphony that at once evoked dread and thoughts of great deeds.

War.

Those who said the word made it sound like an emotion, not an event. It was a word that distilled human failing and sanctified it into a sensation of power and honour until it coursed through one and all, commander and foot-soldier, old battle-hand and untested youth alike.

War.

It was a smell, the kind that seeped in through the pores, lay on the skin and hovered, as omnipresent as a mist. It was the reek of sweat mingled with the scent of bloodlust; a primal contagion that drove men and animals alike to rampage till there was little left to distinguish one from the other. Elephants trumpeted, horses neighed, men screamed in animal voices. There was never stillness, there was never silence. Dust rose, spurred by living feet to form storm-like clouds, but then soon settled as the blood of the dead turned the field to red-brown sludge. In that thick mud, a mixture of rent flesh and rubble stirred now and then by vultures and crows, the eviscerated and limbless thrashed in the last throes of death, splattering their putrid remains on stoic friends and delighted foes alike.

Govinda and Partha weaved in and out of the battle-storm like a lightning bolt, their horses' legs and underbellies slathered red with slime.

‘What in Rudra’s name is that?’ Partha asked, as a curiously shaped arrow shot overhead.

Before Govinda could reply, an explosion of sound and fire ripped over the battlefield. Even the immaculately trained Balahak whinnied and snorted in fear. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked Partha, once he had managed to regain control of the horses.

‘Yes, but what demon was that?’

‘No demon,’ Govinda replied, but the scene that greeted them once the rain of ash and dust left by the weapon cleared contradicted his words.

Where the weapon had hit the ground the red earth of Kuru’s Fields had turned into a circle of blackness, smooth like the night. Around it, in more concentric circles than Partha could count, lay red and grey and colourless death, mangled forms of what had once been hundreds of living creatures. In its wake, the sound of flesh sizzling in its own fat and blood on scalding bone, rose in invitation to scavengers. But even the vultures seemed to know not to wheel in for the feast. Not yet, not while the acrid smell lingered.

Already, Dhrstyadymn was giving the command to retreat, trying to get the men out of range of Bhisma’s weapons. He looked over at Govinda, his eyes holding numerous questions, but Govinda had already flicked the reins, urging his horses ahead. He whistled, signalling to Pradymna and Shikandin to join him, and made directly for Bhisma. Partha understood. They had to hold Bhisma away and give Dhrstyadymn a chance to pull their men back.

‘Who is that fool?’ Partha said as they neared Bhisma. A single commandant wearing Chief Virat’s lion emblem stood with his small group of men in Bhisma’s path, preventing the Grandsire from advancing.

‘A brave, selfless fool,’ Govinda replied. ‘A fool who shall die today.’

‘Not in vain.’ Partha declared. Raising his bow, he sent an array of shafts through the air at whip-speed, trying to distract Bhisma and give the courageous commandant some reprieve. But it was too late. Bhisma’s shafts caught the commandant’s charioteer in the throat, and he lost control of the horses. As the rig overturned, the commandant was thrown to the ground.

When the dust settled, it revealed Swetha, Chief Virat's second son, his head severed from his body by a distinct white-metal, crescent-tipped arrow.

Partha gasped.

Govinda's eyes narrowed but he did not speak, his attention entirely on getting close to the enemy. Partha saw the opportunity, and sent yet another host of arrows towards Bhisma. His intent was merely dissuasion and not retaliation, and the shafts missed their target completely. 'Hai! Kill him, you cross-eyed son of a Kuru!' Govinda shouted.

Bhisma laughed, and others in Syoddhan's army jeered as Partha faltered. Govinda glared at them, wishing he could fight, and had nearly resolved to fling himself bodily at Bhisma when he heard a familiar and welcome voice.

'Calm down, Cousin!' Yuyudhana said, drawing up alongside to release a stream of arrows, his speed and skill rivalling Partha's. 'I don't know which bewitching woman told you that anger becomes you. Frankly, it doesn't.'

For a moment Partha was shocked. Then, his wounded pride caught up with him. 'Jahayata! Jahayata! Strike!' he let out a battle cry, and threw himself back into the fray. Bhim echoed his call and followed suit. Kripa, Dron, Syoddhan and Dussasan had already rallied to Bhisma's support and now faced off against Partha and his companions.

Each man fought against one opponent, using no weapon other than his bow and arrows. Speed, aim, strategy would all combine to decide who would win or lose in this breathless skirmish. Soon, unable to face Shikandin's wrath, Kripa fell back, and a well-aimed arrow from Yuyudhana cut through Dron's armour, wounding the Acharya. Dron would have fought on, but Syoddhan, knowing his teacher's obstinate nature, called out an order to retreat.

Yuyudhana grinned and, leaving the battle to his lieutenants, leant against his heavy bow, catching his breath and exchanging banter with Shikandin. 'He's as good as his father,' he commented, watching Pradymna.

'What do you mean good? He's better!' Shikandin riposted.

‘Hah! No way!’

Pradymna let rip a series of arrows that cut through Dussasan’s bowstring and also the straps of his armour. ‘How is that for a decider?’ he called out to Yuyudhana and Shikandin.

Bhim, however, was having a less enviable time against Syoddhan.

‘He is formidable. I mean Syoddhan…’ Govinda said, as he and Partha tried to follow Bhisma while the others kept his protectors engaged.

‘He is,’ Partha replied, a little breathless. ‘But somehow, he never did get the adulation he deserves.’

‘Balabadra used to…’ Govinda began but stopped, his attention elsewhere.

Asvattama blocked their way, his rig coming in from the side to stop squarely in their path, his lion’s-tail banner standing firm with the steady breeze. His charioteer bore the restrained expression of a man more fearful of the warrior he served than the ones he faced as he kept the brown steeds yoked to the rig steady and still. Asvattama himself had the satisfied aspect of a man to whom battle was the true reward for dealing with the inconvenient inevitability of victory. Moving slowly, he took aim with his bow and drew the string back, long fingers barely touching the taut skein, relishing the way the arrow’s metal shaft felt cool against his skin. He let go of the string, the resultant husky twang sounding like a courtesan’s moan of pleasure in his ear, the sharp string lovingly grazing his cheek. With immaculate form and speed that belied his sensation of pleasure, he followed up with a rain of arrows.

‘Watch out!’ Partha called, as Asvattama’s arrows curved in. Govinda dodged the assault, but snarled in anger as the steed Shaibya took an arrow on his well-muscled flank.

‘That damned Angirasa!’ Govinda swore and jumped off their rig to pull the arrow out of Shaibya’s flesh. Asvattama watched, tight-lipped, but then raised his bow to the skies to release another hail of arrows. Partha retaliated in kind, though not without noticing that, by accident or otherwise, not a single shaft from Asvattama’s bow landed near the silver-white stallions again.

Impatient, Govinda climbed back on the rig. ‘We don’t have time for this!’ he called out to Partha. ‘Bhisma is getting away!’ At a flick of the reins, the stallions reared up with a whinny and charged straight at Asvattama. A dumbstruck Partha held on to the grab-pole on the side of the rig as the vehicle hurtled forward. Around them, ally and enemy alike watched open-mouthed as the rig bore down on Asvattama. Collision was inevitable, and death almost certain.

Asvattama stood his ground, a curious look on his face.

Govinda was not deterred. He called out to his horses: ‘Now Balahak, steady! Steady! Shaibya, Megha, turn! That’s it, Sugriv. Pull, Balahak, pull!’

Partha yelled despite himself, but his voice was drowned out by Balahak’s piercing whinny. The silver-white stallion flashed past Asvattama’s horses, hardly a couple of feet between the two facing steeds. Sliding on the ground, Balahak came to a stop. On his left, Shaibya and Megha charged on, turning in a tight circle as they felt the counter of his weight. In the middle, Sugriv, the youngest of the four steeds, daintily kept them all balanced. The rig, along with its occupants, hurtled through the air in an arc and landed with a jarring thud.

Govinda grunted with exertion as the reins were nearly yanked out of his grip. The muscles in his shoulders burned as though they had been ripped apart. It was all he could do to flex the reins in yet another signal to the battle-hardy horses. In that fraction of a moment the four stallions turned where they stood, aligning themselves perfectly with each other. Before Asvattama could react they were off at a gallop.

But it was too late. Bhisma was gone. From the far end of the battlefield, screams rang loud and the smell of burning flesh wafted through the air once again.

2

IT WAS DARK AS GOVINDA AND PARTHA SLOWLY RODE BACK OVER the battlefield. Men from both camps worked side by side, clearing the dead. The first of the many huge pyres that would blaze that night came alight next to the river, beyond the battlefield. Over one of the pyres, the two men knew, stood Chief Virat, mourning his son. It made the bitterness they felt all the more difficult to bear.

‘What happened, Govinda? How did things turn so quickly? One moment we were laughing, cutting Dussasan’s bowstrings and exchanging harmless arrows. The next…’

‘Harmless? Open your eyes, Partha.’

‘But…but it wasn’t supposed to be this way.’

Govinda merely grunted by way of response.

Partha tried to keep quiet, but could not. ‘What was that…thing, Govinda? That horrible thing, which Bhisma…?’

Govinda did not reply immediately, lost as he was in thought. Dully, he said, ‘The Agneya-astra. Essentially, they are projectiles made of black nitre, also known as saltpetre. The substance is not very different from what’s coated on flaming arrows, like the ones you used at Kandava; except, much larger amounts are condensed and packed into hollowed arrow-shafts. The shaft’s impact shakes up the nitre, making it burn and explode. That’s what you saw today. Each of those infernal things has cost us at least a hundred men, maybe more. I shudder to think what will happen if he has bigger missiles – weapons large enough to launch with catapults.’

‘Surely, those are just rumours and exaggerations? I mean, I’d heard of such things, but…they don’t really exist, do they?’

Govinda snorted, disgruntled. ‘Who knows what astra-weapons have lain hidden in the dusty armouries of Aryavarta’s kings, their purpose and powers hitherto undiscovered. Bhisma’s arsenal is somewhat predictable. If Vasusena eventually does agree to fight, I don’t dare imagine the weapons he has in store for us. As for Asvattama and Jayadrath – not even the best of our spies can tell us what their arsenal comprises. Dharma was right, we are facing an army of Firewrights, though not in the sense that he meant those words.’

‘What if *we*…?’ Partha excitedly began. ‘What if we use astra weapons?’

‘You mean your secret horde?’

Partha frowned. ‘How did you know…?’

‘Oh please, Partha. During the Imperial conquest and afterward too, your fascination for weapons like the Gandiva was evident. I know your arsenal better than you do!’

‘Surely I’m not the only one on our side to possess Wright weapons?’

Govinda said, ‘No… Panchala’s armouries have Wright-weapons, and Dhrstyadymn knows how to use them – that is why his father sent him to study under Acharya Dron. We’ve all played this game in our own ways, Partha… None on this field is truly free of intrigue.’

‘That is the answer then – we counter astra weapons with astra weapons.’

Govinda raised a scornful eyebrow. He said, ‘I doubt Dharma would allow it.’

‘He allowed it at Kandava.’

‘Kandava was different. Gandiva, your Firewright-wrought bow is different.’

‘How?’

‘You should know the story by now, Partha. The Great Scourge was not meant to rid Aryavarta of astra-weapons. It was meant to move them into the hands of those who were faithful to the Firstborn, and so these trusted kings were asked to take control of and use Firewright weapons. Bhisma Devavrata was the foremost of such rulers, and his arsenal, now sanctified

by the Vyasa Dwaipayana himself, was built on the death or surrender of the Firewrights. It is the same with Dron and Kripa. When they swore their allegiance to the Firstborn, forsaking the Angirasa affiliations of their birth, they did not forsake their weapons. Nor did the Firstborn ask them to. The Firstborn have never had any problem with the craft of the Firewrights, only with the issue of who has control over such craft. Unfortunately, getting rid of the Firewrights also meant that we got rid of those who could keep these terrible devices in check, control their numbers and power. Not all their inventions were meant for war, certainly not in their original form or intent.'

Partha thought for a while. 'And black nitre?' he then asked. 'What other possible use could there be for this grotesque substance?'

Govinda said, 'The Firewrights originally used black nitre as a means to conquer rock and stone, to break through mountains and build over them. But that is the trouble, is it not? All craft becomes a weapon in the hands of those who want power. That problem goes far beyond the conflict between the Firewrights and the Firstborn.'

The two men trudged into camp, expecting to find a Council of War in progress at the Command Tent. To their wonder, the tent was empty.

'By Yama and Yami…!' Partha mumbled.

'Ah, there you are,' Yuyudhana came towards them. 'The Council is over, but don't worry. You didn't miss anything. All Dharma said was to send you both to see him as soon as you arrived.'

Govinda and Partha exchanged silent words. 'Go,' Govinda finally said out loud. 'I'll meet you there shortly.'

Partha left. Govinda followed at a slower place, Yuyudhana alongside.

'Well? How is Chief Virat?'

Yuyudhana was grim. 'How do you think? He took it in his stride, as did Uttara. But, frankly, I don't know what to make of what happened on the battlefield. Whatever it was that Bhisma used… Anyway,' he forced himself to take on a level tone. 'Dharma has decided that tomorrow we will form a more strategic formation. He expects that this will demonstrate to the enemy that we are superior in term of skills and thus serve to further

intimidate them into surrender. We are to form the array known as krauncharuma – the crane – which, he informed us, allows for great flexibility and speed of attack. Shikandin's forest people are to form the head of the crane, with the Panchala armies led by Dhrupad behind them, holding the centre of the formation. Dharma and Bhim will form the tactical attack teams that comprise the right wing of the crane, and Sadev and Nakul lead the left wing. King Virat's troops will be the rearguard, and hold the line in case the rest need to retreat.'

'And what about Partha and I?'

Yuyudhana snorted in contempt. 'Partha is to fly his banner in the lead, but stay well-protected. Don't you see what Dharma is doing? Is it that you do, Govinda, but you don't care? Or, like the others, will you too be taken in by his grand descriptions of how the celestials themselves successfully used the crane formation against the demons of Patala?'

'He said that?'

'That, and more. I couldn't say this in front of Partha, but Dharma has become worse than his usual self-righteous self. He's suddenly remembered that he's a king and commander. I tell you; this evening's meeting was unbearable! I wasn't sure whether to kill myself or kill him, but I was certainly tempted to do one of the two! It was just…I say, Govinda, are you listening to me?'

Govinda only said, 'Come. Dharma waits.'

Yuyudhana chose to remain outside Dharma's luxurious tent while Govinda went in. He found Dharma pacing, restless. Panchali sat on a cushioned stool, gazing into the distance, lost in rumination. Partha stood in a corner, staring at his brother. He shrugged as Govinda gave him a questioning look, to say that he did not know why they were there. Dharma chose not to notice them as he continued to pace the carpeted tent.

'You sent for me, Dharma?' Govinda said. His armour was dirty and scraped against his bruises, and he longed for a bath and some sleep – but it would all have to wait. Dharma was their leader and this was his war.

'So, an eventful day…' Dharma began. 'But we've held our own well. Good work, Partha…'

Govinda said nothing, but an irate Partha stormed out of the tent. A hushed exchange took place outside, followed by the crunch of gravel as Partha walked away, Yuyudhana with him.

In a belligerent tone, Dharma asked Govinda, ‘That speech you gave Partha yesterday… I’ve been wondering, what was it you told him?’

‘I thought you caught most of it. After all, you agreed with him that we ought to fight on.’

‘I caught you saying that we could win, or so I thought. And if Partha, the best warrior amongst us agrees with that estimation, so do I. To surrender when victory is imminent would be dishonourable! Indeed, I thought you said something along those lines…I heard you speak of duty and reason and compassion…did I not?’

‘You did. What I said was…’

‘Never mind… Just go calm Partha down. I would not be surprised if, sooner or later, Syoddhan came asking for peace on our terms. They know now we are not cowards, nor is our courage to be overcome by numbers. Soon, they will also understand the power of righteousness. It won’t be long…’ Dharma concluded. With a meaningful glance at Govinda, he began removing his unblemished armour.

Govinda understood what Dharma wanted and why. He came forward to help, as if he were little more than a common attendant.

Panchali finally turned to them. She got to her feet and addressed Dharma, now in his clean and immaculately white robes. ‘If there’s nothing else Dharma, I’m tired. I think I’ll go to my tent now.’

‘Stay, Panchali,’ Dharma ordered, with a meaningful smile. ‘Stay here with me tonight.’

Panchali mutely complied, making her way to stand by Dharma’s bed. She could not bring herself to meet Govinda’s eyes as he wished her and Dharma a good night and left. She suspected that Govinda was grateful for that.

3

SEVEN DAYS LATER SYODDHAN'S SURRENDER WAS NOWHERE IN sight; neither was his defeat. Dharma's optimism, however, remained strong.

Govinda walked into the Command Tent at the end of the eighth day of battle to find Dharma in the middle of discussing battle plans for the next morning. Nearly every person who was allowed to be present at the meeting, from the silent spectator Dhaumya to the wide-eyed Kshatradharman, was there. Dhrstyadymn hovered near Dharma, glowering at his brother-in-law, clearly not pleased with the proceedings.

'…the elephants,' Dharma was saying. He continued, his tone filled with approval, 'Bhim, you fought bravely today. The sight of you standing there as those elephants rushed at you – By Rudra, I cannot get it out of my mind. But, valour aside, such risks are unnecessary. It's too dangerous to face elephants that way. Leave them to the archers and spearmen.'

'But,' Bhim protested, 'that was exactly the problem. Bhagadatta's elephants are well-trained and well protected in their armour. Our arrows and spears only wound them and infuriate them further. Men were being lost to their tusks and under their feet – our men. Every single day, the elephants have broken through the head of our formation.'

'But that is the point! That is our strategy! While Bhagadatta and Bhisma are distracted with trying to break through the front, we are able to counter them from the flanks. Look…'

Dharma moved to the large table and shuffled through the maps and parchments laid out on it. Pulling out one of them, he turned to the others. 'Four days ago, if you remember, Bhisma deployed his forces in the eagle formation. He led the attack himself, as the beak, so to say, supported by

Asvattama and Kritavarman as the bird's eyes. Others provided a further line of support – the head. But where was Syoddhan? He formed part of the bird's back. The back, can you imagine! It doesn't get more defensive than that. We could have won the war that day. Unfortunately, Commander Dhrstyadymn here, along with our dear brother Partha, decided that the appropriate counter formation was the half-moon.'

Dhrstyadymn said, 'It was either that or another eagle formation. We could have also formed a garuda-bird and let the two enemy lines break on each other…'

'Yes! Yes! Exactly.'

'But for that, Dharma, we'd have needed our best warriors centre and front. On your command, Partha, Bhim, Yuyudhana, myself – we were all in the middle array or in the flanks. I had no choice but to call back the Matsya and Kashi infantry from the lead and let our chariot-warriors and best archers take over from the sides. Hence, the half-moon formation. You will note that when Bhisma realized the half-moon could not be broken, he had no choice but to realign his troops in the defensive makara-crocodile formation. He and the other key commanders of Syoddhan's forces held the frontline, snapping at anyone who approached, like a crocodile with great teeth, and allowing his armies to fall back. Our half-moon, on the other hand, was quickly realigned into an aggressive syena-bird. Our commanders came together from the flanks to form a new frontline that met Bhisma directly. It was the three of us – Bhim, Shikandin and I who led that attack and I know it won't be one that the Grandsire, Asvattama and the others will dare forget!'

A cheer erupted from Bhim and was taken up by some of the others in the tent before it died down under Dharma's withering stare.

Dharma tut-tutted, the condescending gesture making Dhrstyadymn grit his teeth. '*You* will note that Bhim was hurt as a result of that foolhardy attack. It is the unexpected that gives us the edge, Commander. And the unexpected requires planned sacrifices, not mindless valour. If your attack was truly unforgettable, Syoddhan's offer of surrender should have been

before us right now, as I had planned. Doesn't that tell you that your strategy, though quite a spectacle to watch, was not at all effective?'

A voice so far unheard in the Command Tent said, 'Forgive me, Your Highness, but how is loss of life effective?' Uttamaujas, his cheeks reddening under everyone's gaze, added, 'I ask so that I may learn, and not to question your wisdom…'

Dharma glared briefly at an unperturbed Shikandin and turned back to the young inquisitor. 'What loss of life do you speak of, young man?'

'If I may…' Uttamaujas took the parchment Dharma had been using out of his hand. He then laid it out on the table and began making his own markings on it as he spoke. 'The instance you have just spoken of was an exception and, in your view, an ineffective exception. For the most part, we have followed your orders to the last detail and arranged our armies in the formations you have commanded. For example, the krauncha-crane formation on the second day of battle. Your Highness, I cannot help but notice that most of those formations had my people and the Matsyans at the frontline.' 'This is a war, Uttamaujas,' Dharma said, with strained patience, 'and in wars it is typical for the infantry to lead the attack.'

'True. But only in the event of head-on assaults, as I have been told. If your intent is, as you said, to strategically deploy our forces, then… Also, the day before, Commander Dhrstyadymn's unique use of the makara-crocodile array as an offensive and not as a defence formation left the enemy with no choice but to form a defensive makara of their own. It worked well for us, to the point that Acharya Dron was severely incapacitated. The Commander was near-unstoppable, till you ordered us to reform into the suchivyuha or needle formation…'

'Are you saying you are a better military strategist than I am, boy?' Dharma flared.

'He is saying,' Chief Virat said, 'that the Needle would have been an effective move had we continued to keep Commander Dhrstyadymn and the others in the lead. Instead, you had them pulled back and put our infantry in the vanguard of the formation. Look what that led to… Doesn't it show how the enemy reads you as not aggressive in the least, that they used a simple

maze formation yesterday? And instead of surrounding the maze and breaking through it, you ordered a diamond formation to hold the line… My daughter was at the lead of the array with our men when Bhagadatta's elephants began trampling them down. If Shikandin hadn't broken formation to go to their aid, Uttara – *your daughter-in-law* – would be dead!'

Dharma was stunned. He looked from Virat to Uttara, then back to Virat again. 'What was she doing there?' he asked.

'Not all unit commanders believe in leading from the back.' The retort came, unexpectedly, from Sadev.

'Agraja, the Chief is right,' Nakul added. 'Right now, Syoddhan is fighting this war a lot better than we are. And I don't mean just the fact that his side uses astra-weapons. For all our attempts at strategy, he is not without his plans either. He has ordered all his other commanders to protect Bhisma, while the Grandsire decimates our armies, unchecked. Each Firewright arrow Bhisma fires brings down hundreds of men! Add to that the trouble from Bhagadatta's elephants…'

Dharma protested, 'Our strength is hardly depleted! Look, we're all here!'

'Really?' Virat took up the argument again. 'Eight days, and my numbers are less than a third of what we began with. Do you know how many dead Matsyans that is? You've walked right into Syoddhan's trap, Dharma. You're still confident because your precious commanders and kinsmen are around you, but what about the soldiers who have died waging your war? Syoddhan and Bhisma see what you don't – that those men are your true strength, and you are wasting their lives. Once they are dead, it will take but one well-aimed arrow from Bhisma to bring your elite group of warriors down, and then it'll be over. We have got to defeat Bhisma before he kills us all. Give the orders, else…'

Dharma gasped. 'What is this? Mutiny? Rebellion? If you lot would rather go throw yourself at Syoddhan's feet, go now! The fault is mine for…'

‘My apologies, Your Highness.’ At a sign from Shikandin, Uttamaujas went down on one knee before Dharma. ‘I did not mean to question your judgement. But I fear for my people, and Chief Virat’s, as well as the herdsmen of Kashi and the farmers of the southern nations…’ He bit his lip, trying to make himself complete the apology. ‘But…but I must ask these questions, so that I may answer those who in turn ask them of me. I was in the lead with my men today, when we used the sringataka-horned formation to break the enemy’s ocean array. Just one skilled archer of Yuyudhana’s or Partha’s competence, not to mention the use of astra-weapons, would have saved countless lives. The enemy was picking us off at their leisure, from a distance, as we rushed forward again and again to break their lines. Good soldiers died today before they had broken a sweat or struck a blow. They died in vain, running around like mad men, because they had been told to do so. We had no chance…’

‘Why you…’ An enraged Yudhamanyu grabbed Uttamaujas by his arm and lifted him to his feet. ‘How dare you, you forest-monkey? How dare you speak to Emperor Dharma this way? And what do you know of battle or honour, or dying in vain!’ He spat, accurately, on Uttamaujas’s foot.

‘Yudhamanyu!’ Both Shikandin and Dhrstyadymn raised their voices at once.

Yudhamanyu looked from one to the other. ‘You…’ he pointed to Shikandin. ‘You are nothing to me. Nothing. But you, Uncle Dhrstyadymn, I thought you’d…’ He shook his head, and with renewed wrath flew at Uttamaujas, landing a punch directly to his face.

Uttamaujas fell backwards from the impact, but had the presence of mind to grab Yudhamanyu and drag him down. The two rolled on the floor, trading blows and abuses, leaving everyone else at a loss for what to do. Dhrupad, their grandfather, drew his sword, the scrape of metal driving Dhrstyadymn and Panchali to protectively leap forward. They tried to separate the two brawling lads, but neither would listen. Shikandin retreated to a corner, arms crossed on his chest, well aware that his intervention would just make matter worse.

‘Enough!’ The voice rang above the tumult, something in its tone bringing them all, including the fighting men, to a stop. Abhimanyu made his way into the tent, his eyes fixed on Yudhamanyu and Uttamaujas. A petrified Kshatradharman was clinging to him. Without taking his eyes off the two brawlers, Abhimanyu took a dagger out from his waistband and held it out to the boy. ‘Kshatradharman! Your brother is in danger. Take this weapon to him, so that he can strike back.’

The young boy eagerly took the dagger. He ran ahead a few steps but came to a stop as confusion spread over on his innocent face. He turned back to Abhimanyu and whispered, as though fearful to speak, ‘Which one?’

‘What?’ Abhimanyu persisted. ‘I didn’t hear you.’

Again the boy whispered. ‘Which one? Which of my two brothers do you want me to take this to?’

Abhimanyu walked up to stand next to the trembling boy. ‘Well, which one of them do you like better?’

‘Sometimes I like Uttamaujas. He plays with me and tells me stories. But sometimes I like Yudhamanyu. He lets me pet his horse and teaches me about swords and riding…but only when no one can see us. I like them both.’

‘But they are fighting. So whose side are you on, Kshatradharman?’

The child stared at the dagger he was holding till tears welled up in his eyes. Finally, he confessed. ‘I don’t know why they are fighting. They are not enemies. The enemy is there…across the battlefield.’ He buried his face in Abhimanyu’s chest, his innocent courage spent.

Abhimanyu patted the boy on the back and took the dagger from him. A relieved Kshatradharman retreated, running immediately to Shikandin. Abhimanyu sheathed the weapon, and strode over to where Uttamaujas and Yudhamanyu still lay on the ground. He hauled them both up to a standing position.

‘That child,’ Abhimanyu said, ‘that boy…your brother…has more sense and decency that you two grown louts! Shame on you! Have you, for a moment, thought of anyone or anything beyond yourselves and your injured

pride? You, Yudhamanyu, you think your father betrayed your mother? Have you bothered to ask your father what the truth is, or why he did what he did? Don't you think that, like you, he too wished for a life beyond being a prince, a ceremonial, political toy? Why can't you give him a fraction of the consideration you think you deserve? And you, Uttamaujas. Stop behaving as though every nobleman is out to get you and your people. Am I not one of "your people"? Will you not fight with me? I've not looked back once when you've been in my rearguard; tell me, was that a mistake? By Hara, you two disgust me!'

Abhimanyu marched out of the tent, muttering to himself. Yudhamanyu and Uttamaujas glanced shamefully around the tent, and then at each other. By unspoken agreement, they got to their feet and followed Abhimanyu, to pacify him.

A silence reigned after the three young men had gone, not completely unpleasant as Uttara and Govinda exchanged proud smiles, while Bhim glowed with appreciation.

'Well, that is that,' Dharma said, in what he thought was the conclusion of the meeting. 'As for tomorrow's formation… Let's sleep on it, shall we? There has been enough excitement for the day. We shall meet again in the morning.'

Either out of physical tiredness or a different kind of weariness, everyone gathered in the Command Tent dispersed without another word.

4

ABHIMANYU LET OUT A SHRILL, MOST UN-WARRIORLIKE CURSE and quickly held up the small cloth he had been using to dry himself to hide what he could of his nude form. It had been a long day in many ways and he had been glad to enjoy some solitude and a hot bath at the end of it. Just when he thought he was done for the day, he found Uttara peering into his tent while he was still as naked as the day he was born. Oh well, he thought, settling for whatever lay ahead. Knowing Uttara, it could be an argument.

Uttara was affected neither by his resigned attitude nor his state of undress. ‘Oh please!’ she said, entering his tent and taking a seat as she continued to look straight at Abhimanyu. He, in turn, decided that two could play the game. He let the cloth drop to the floor and sauntered over to Uttara. It pleased him that she did not avert her gaze. ‘You wished to see me, Mahamatra?’ he asked, hands on his bare hips.

‘I did. Unless this is an inconvenient time?’

‘I could never be inconvenienced by a beautiful woman. Especially not my wife.’

Uttara ignored his reference to their marriage, saying instead, ‘You did well today, with Uttamaujas and Yudhamanyu.’

‘You came here to tell me that?’

‘I…’ she faltered and, standing up, ran her hand over a arrow-wound on Abhimanyu’s torso. If she noticed the way the light of the flickering brazier played over the taut muscles of his chest and arms she betrayed no sign of it.

‘It will leave a scar,’ Abhimanyu said. ‘Yet another reason to find me unattractive, I suppose.’

‘If that was in jest, Abhimanyu, it is not in the least funny. But then, when have you been capable of saying anything intelligent.’

‘Not since I met you, that’s for sure.’

Uttara studied Abhimanyu’s handsome but stern countenance. He was close, and she could smell the sandalwood and cinnamon that she recognized as his unique musk, mingled faintly with the turmeric he had used as a disinfectant during his bath. Her heart began to beat faster and Uttara tried hard to appear unaffected. But when Abhimanyu’s eyes narrowed, and he bit his lower lip without knowing he was doing so, she was left with no doubt that he felt just as she did. They stood that way in silence, Abhimanyu unable to look away from Uttara’s large eyes, just as she could not bear to take her hand off him. The sound of footsteps passing by brought them both back to their senses.

Uttara said, keeping her voice deliberately casual. ‘We are at war. There will be scars. Anyway, I came to tell you that the Chief is here. He and his men are camped in the valley to the south-east. I sent word for them to remain there till I came for them. I asked them to be patient. Dharma Yudhisthir hasn’t made up his mind about doing battle on the day of the eclipse as yet; who knows when our leaders will be able to raise the matter of the Chief’s arrival with him.’

‘Eclipse… That is in five days, is it not?’

Uttara sighed. ‘Yes. A solar eclipse. Unless you still believe what you were told as a child – that it’s a demon who chases the sun and gobbles it up?’

‘Give me a hungry demon any day! I’ve been listening to completely useless and boring debates amongst some of the commanders on whether it contravenes the ethics of war to fight during the eclipse, and if it does do the usual rules not apply, and do the muhurttas after the eclipse count as a new day… And always, always, it comes back somehow to astra weapons. The enemy has them and we don’t. That singular fact is used to support the idea that we, too, should use astra weapons, and also to argue against their use. But then, you know all that…’

‘Yes. But about the eclipse…what have they decided?’

Abhimanyu groaned. ‘They haven’t! Of course, Emperor Dharma insists the eclipse is an omen that Syoddhan will surrender, but King Dhrupad has said if we were going to bring in omens and all that, we could well interpret it the other way, too. That shook the Emperor up a bit, but Father…that is, Uncle Govinda, actually fell asleep during the discussion, or he pretended to! Have you told him yet, by the way? About the Chief and his men?’

‘No. I came to tell you first. I’ll go find him now.’ Uttara turned to leave, but then glanced at Abhimanyu over her shoulder. ‘It wasn’t unpleasant, you know – our trip. To go find Chief Hidimbya, I mean. You weren’t half as irritating to spend time with as I thought you’d be. I could get used to you.’

By the time Abhimanyu could put words together in response, Uttara was gone. Pushing aside the temptations that flooded his mind and wracked his body, he retired for the night.

The soft scrape of fabric was all it took to rouse Abhimanyu from his sleep. He sat up at once in bed, in the same move drawing the dagger that he kept under his pillow.

‘Shh. It’s me.’ He heard Uttara’s voice through the darkness. Throwing aside the dagger, he stoked the wick lamp next to his bed into a bright flame to see her standing by his bed.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘I-I had to tell you… I love you, Abhimanyu….’

Abhimanyu looked up at his wife, surprised and overjoyed by her frank tone. Her eyes glowed with desire and unrestrained affection. At that, he felt something die in him and something else come to life instead. No longer was his the raging passion of youth but it was more. He wanted to be close and closer still; to revel in the precious, private intimacy that was theirs and theirs alone. He wanted every joy life had to offer to be theirs till they were old and wrinkled and still irrevocably in love. Reaching out, he pulled her to him, wanting nothing more than to be one with her in the most intimate way possible.

Later, as they lay awake in each other's arms, Abhimanyu said, 'I love you too, Uttara. I did not think I'd fall in love with you so quickly or so deeply, but I have…'

Uttara swallowed hard and tried to will back the tears, but could not. Neither could Abhimanyu. Gently, they brushed each other's tears away and bundled their naked forms tighter against each other, cherishing the moment. They lay that way for a long time, talking of things past and dreaming of their future together till they fell into a content sleep.

5

MORNING BROUGHT WITH IT SETTLED TEMPERS AND RENEWED focus. Dharma, particularly, seemed determined to show firmness and benevolence at once. He refused to compromise on his strategy with the formations, but did agree to some changes in the arrangement of the different divisions – though few thought his decisions were of consequence. Some sections of the Matsya and Kashi infantry were replaced with archers and sharp-shooters from one of the Naga-descended tribes of the north whom Partha had brought under submission decades ago during the Imperial campaign. Rumour had it that Partha enjoyed more than just loyalty from the princess who led these tribes, and it was these affections that had brought her people to Kuru's Fields. Dharma tried hard to ignore all such talk and to gratefully accept the strength his forces gained from their numbers.

'It will help to have archers in the vanguard,' Dhrstyadymn admitted, but then added, 'we…we could do with reinforcements. We can barely scrape a full formation together with the infantry we now have. I hate to say this, Dharma, but a day or two longer is all we can last before it comes down to us – the unit commanders – and only us. What few elephants we have are nearly all dead. Our horses remain, but… We need to find a way to destroy Bhagadatta, and for that we need reinforcements.'

Dharma was adamant. 'We don't need reinforcements. And if we did, who would we call on?'

'We've had this conversation before, Dharma.' Dhrstyadymn said.

'And you know I disagree with you. Besides, it's too late now. They're too far away to help.'

Govinda said, ‘They are here. They’re in the woods on the northern face of the hills. They are ready to join battle at our command. Send Uttara to bring them to camp. Tell her to take Balahak.’

The others watched, perplexed, as Dharma floundered and then found a grip on himself. ‘Uttara…Now I see, Govinda. Now I see why you sent Abhimanyu and Uttara on this particular task. You had planned it all along, haven’t you? What have you tempted Hidimbya here with? My crown? And is that a false promise that you have made, or do you indeed intend to…’

Govinda interrupted, impatient. ‘Yes, I’d planned it all along, despite your objections. You can try me for treason in peacetime, if that’s what you want. But right now there’s a war going on, and we are not winning it.’

‘Stop treating me like a fool, Govinda. You know well why I refused to heed your advice on this.’

Govinda looked around at the others, and chose his words carefully. ‘Because it upsets your precious Divine Order? Abhimanyu! Come here.’ The young man complied. Govinda laid an affectionate hand on his back and continued, ‘If it’s of any interest to you, Dharma, he knew. He has known all along. In fact, all Hidimbya wanted was to be left alone, but Abhimanyu and Uttara are the ones who have brought him here, convinced his people to fight on your side.’

Dharma turned to Abhimanyu, who nodded in agreement. Dharma was visibly disappointed. ‘All right,’ he said, in a choked voice. ‘But I don’t want to see that Rikshasa here in the Command Tent, ever. Is that clear?’ With that, he left the tent. At a sign from Govinda, Bhim followed him out.

Chief Virat waited till they were gone, and then asked, ‘Who’s waiting in woods?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Govinda, tell us! Who?’

‘Bhim’s son. He was born before Panchali and Dharma were married…’

‘But that would make him…’

‘I know. It makes him the eldest of all the children and heir to Dharma’s throne. Abhimanyu has planned to install him as Crown Prince in his stead once this was over…’

‘And you knew? You knew of this…man’s existence when you orchestrated my daughter’s wedding with Abhimanyu?’

‘I did. If you feel I betrayed you, I apologize. But I think you will understand more than anyone else here why I had to do not just that, but also what I have now done.’

Tension filled the Command Tent as a glowering Virat considered Govinda’s words, but it was soon dispelled. ‘I do,’ Virat said. ‘This is not the time for selfish ambitions. Greater things are at stake. My daughter clearly saw that if she has been a part of this plan all along.

It wouldn’t hurt me to learn from her. Now come along, all of you. We have another long day ahead of us.’

One by one, they all left the Command Tent, Chief Virat and Govinda the last to walk out. Govinda whispered, so that Virat alone could hear, ‘That daughter of yours is a gem, Chief.’

‘So is that nephew…no, son, of yours. Is it my imagination, or have those two stopped wanting to kill each other?’

‘Oh, they’ve stopped all right. By the expression on Abhimanyu’s face, I’d say they have other things on their mind these days.’

Virat laughed. ‘It is the power of youth. They’re able to find happiness and contentment even in the middle of war and strife.’

‘It’s the power of hope, Chief. It’s the power of hope,’ Govinda said, his voice grave as he added, ‘it will take some time to get Hidimbya and his men into camp, but once they’re here, I’ll need your help.’

‘But of course, Govinda. What do you want me to do?’

‘Keep the newcomers in your ranks, Chief. Let them find lodgings with your soldiers. I don’t think Dharma is quite ready to meet Hidimbya yet, and I don’t want to push him to any hasty decisions. Hope is all very well, but it won’t hurt to spare a thought for reality.’

‘Speaking of which, Dharma has not ordered a formation for today as yet, has he?’

‘No,’ Govinda said. ‘He finally leaves that task to the man best suited for it: Dhrstyadymn.’

‘I’m curious, Govinda,’ Virat said in a low voice. ‘I mean, I know Dhrstyadymn is an excellent warrior and also that he studied under Acharya Dron as a grown man and all that… But it occurred to me that a man like you would have another reason, a very good reason, for choosing him as Commander…’

‘True,’ Govinda said, smiling.

‘Well? Are you going to tell me or not?’ Virat nudged him with his elbow.

‘What can I say, Chief? I’d rather our former emperor not hear me sing our Commander’s praises so. Let’s just say Dhrstyadymn was trained, *from his very childhood*, for this.’

‘Childhood, eh? Govinda Shauri, you are a scoundrel, and a secretive scoundrel at that.’

‘But of course, Chief. I’m a Firewright!’

Virat was suddenly solemn. ‘Unfortunately, my friend, you are not the only one…’

Govinda did not respond, but his ruminations came to rest, as they often did these days, on the Secret Keeper. Despite all that had happened, all that had been said and done, the thought of the man always gave Govinda hope.

6

‘YOU’RE RIGHT,’ SYODDHAN BEGAN, ADDRESSING VASUSENA. ‘Dhrstyadymn knows what he is doing. Now that Dharma has given him a free hand…’

Vasusena shrugged, noncommittal, and said nothing. The two men stood under the large pennants at the heart of their camp, the proud elephant banner of Hastina and beside it the black cobra insignia that marked this war as Syoddhan’s.

Across the field, his rig flaunting a banner of its own, Dhrstyadymn led his soldiers, arranged in precise formation, into battle for the day. It was clear that, unlike Dharma, Dhrstyadymn did not make the mistake of underestimating his enemy. Nor for that matter did Syoddhan. He continued to treat his adversary as a threat despite their smaller force. ‘We shall form the box array,’ he told Asvattama, who stood some distance away. The warrior left immediately to find Bhisma. All three men knew the statement for what it truly was: a command, though Asvattama would be careful to phrase it as a suggestion rather than an instruction when he conveyed it to the Grandsire. Vasusena smiled at the thought, his heart filling with affection for his dearest friend. He did not tire of seeing Syoddhan’s efficient leadership and so, despite his decision to not fight while Bhisma did, he found pleasure in observing the battle.

Syoddhan sensed the moment’s warmth and seized upon it. ‘Would you consider…’ he began.

Vasusena quashed the proposition before it was put to him. ‘No.’

He added, smiling at Syoddhan’s crestfallen expression, ‘But you don’t need me at all, my friend. I’d say you nearly have your victory. It is just a matter of a day or two.’

The assessment cheered Syoddhan a little, enough for him to let Vasusena continue to have his way for the time being. ‘I’ll see you later, then,’ he casually said before riding out to join the battle.

As the day progressed, Syoddhan was once again inclined to agree with Vasusena: It did seem victory was well within their grasp. Bhisma continued to wreak havoc with his spectacular missiles: arrows with hollow spheres that contained flammable wax, spears tipped with poisons that burned away skin and flesh to leave behind barren bone, and flaming brands that set the air alight. Wherever Bhisma’s banner of a palmyra with five stars streamed in the wind, there the screams rang loudest.

Govinda and Partha tried incessantly to get close to the Grandsire, but Syoddhan kept them constantly under attack from his best warriors – Dussasan, Kritavarman, Dron and Kripa ringed them at all times, waiting for an opportunity to strike. It was late in the afternoon by the time the two had their chance. When Bhisma and Shalya headed for the western flank, where Syoddhan’s armies were thinly spread, Partha, Shikandin and Abhimanyu moved quickly, converging on Bhisma.

Realizing that the Grandsire was in danger, Syoddhan immediately followed, shouting out to Asvattama and Dussasan to join him. By the time they had caught up with the enemy, Abhimanyu already had Shalya retreating under the onslaught of his arrows, creating the perfect opening for Shikandin to push through and engage with the Grandsire. Snarling, Syoddhan raised his bow, intending to block Shikandin’s expected advance with a shower of arrows. But before he could begin, Partha acted. ‘Stand back,’ he cried out, raising his bow. ‘Stand back, Shikandin. You too, Abhimanyu. I’ve got this.’

A reluctant Shikandin slowed down and fell back, allowing Govinda to speed through the opening Abhimanyu had created in the enemy ranks. Syoddhan was filled with renewed alarm. Govinda was by far the most able horseman on the field and, despite all opposition, was rapidly closing the gap between Partha’s rig and Bhisma.

‘No!’ Syoddhan cried out even as Govinda shouted, loud enough to be heard across the distance, ‘Now, Partha! Now!’

Partha’s response was just a whisper, but Syoddhan did not have to hear it. He saw his cousin’s lips move, read the look in his eyes, and knew exactly what it was. ‘Forgive me, Govinda,’ Partha was saying. ‘Forgive me. Anyone but the Grandsire. Please…’

Syoddhan was filled with a mixture of relief and disbelief, and laughter burbled in his stomach as Govinda brought the rig to a stop. But the first of the two sentiments was short-lived as, without a moment’s hesitation, Govinda jumped off the rig and reached into the depths of the carriage, prompting a warning shout from Shakuni and Dussasan, who had come up alongside Syoddhan. The caution was unnecessary, for all Govinda reached for was one of Partha’s spare swords. Strapping it around his waist, he strode across the field, uncaring of the chaos around him. In a voice that rang across the battlegrounds, he shouted out, ‘Bhisma! Bhisma Devavrata! Come here and face me, if you dare!’

Syoddhan heard the Grandsire’s leonine voice: ‘Govinda! I’m here! Come, let’s make this a battle legends are made of!’

Next to him, Dussasan laughed. ‘That gwala is asking for it,’ he said, raising his bow.

‘No!’ Syoddhan raised a hand in restraint. A disappointed Dussasan looked from his brother to Shakuni, hoping their uncle would convince Syoddhan otherwise.

Shakuni shook his head. ‘Wait,’ he said, and then added, ‘Look.’

The three men turned their attention back to Partha’s rig in time to see Shikandin and Yuyudhana drawing up next to it. After a brief but obviously heated exchange, the three men got down from their vehicles and followed Govinda.

‘They’re mad! They’re all mad!’ Dussasan said, watching as they caught up with Govinda and evidently tried to convince him of the ridiculousness of the attempt, their gestures referring to the undeniable danger to him should he leave the safety of their current position behind a defensive line of their soldiers. Their arguments ostensibly lacked result, for

Shikandin caught Govinda’s arms in a deadlock behind his back, bringing him forcibly to a stop.

It took Syoddhan a while to realize that he, too, was laughing at the scene unfolding before them. It prompted the others of his side to join in, and their ringing guffaws appeared to bring Govinda back to his senses. He stopped resisting Shikandin and loudly said, looking in Syoddhan’s direction, ‘Move out! This is a battlefield, remember!’

As the four men regrouped their forces, Dussasan said, eager, ‘If we attack now…’

‘Let them go,’ Syoddhan declared. He had stopped laughing but a smile still played on his lips. ‘This is victory enough for today and…’ his voice trailed off at the thought of what he had been about to say – that he wanted to sit with Vasusena and relive the joy of the day’s triumph. Then his smile faded.

7

‘CHARMING,’ GOVINDA BEGAN, OOZING SARCASM AND CONTEMPT as he walked into the Command Tent for the evening’s council of war. ‘Tell you what – why don’t we all just troop over to Bhisma’s tent right now and throw ourselves at his mercy.’

‘I don’t like your tone, Govinda.’ Dharma was bitter and sore from his tally of the day’s losses. ‘Nor did I like your theatrics today.’

‘And I don’t like your attitude or that of your brothers! The old man toys with us, playing us for fools, but you simply refuse to listen. What was I supposed to do? Watch and wait my turn to die, when you and Bhisma are done with pretending to fight each other while the rest of Aryavarta burns for you stubborn Kurus? You can call this *your* war all you like, but remember those who wage it for you. Without them, your crown and your claim is as good as lost.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He means,’ Virat intervened, ‘Bhisma must die. We’ve waited long enough for you and your brothers to do the task. We need to see now that you are fighting this war, not merely playing with our lives. You are our Emperor. Don’t let us die in vain.’

The silence that followed was clearly strained. Eventually, Dharma stirred. ‘Partha…’ he began tentatively.

Partha, however, looked to Govinda. As always, something in his friend’s dark eyes reassured him and made him feel at peace. He turned back to Dharma. ‘I agree that Bhisma must be stopped. But I can’t bring myself to attack him. I simply can’t.’ He felt relieved as Govinda nodded, accepting.

Dharma was less benevolent. ‘Partha, you’re a coward. I am ashamed of you.’

‘Agraja, please…’

‘Vathu! Shut up! You and Govinda here will be our undoing! I thought I told you, Govinda. I thought I told you to speak to him, to keep telling him what he needs to hear – yet look at him. He was a shameful sight out there today, hiding from an old dotard!’

‘It is patricide, and…’ Partha began to protest.

‘Enough of that,’ Yuyudhana suddenly interrupted. ‘We’ve been through this before. It’s equally patricide for all of us, just as it is abhorrent that he stands against you, his grandchildren. This is war. Those we fight are our enemy. All that matters now is which one of us can face Bhisma.’

‘Why don’t you face him then?’ Nakul burst out.

‘I’m ready to. But I can tell you that I’d be throwing my life away in vain unless we counter the Grandsire’s astra weapons with our own. I’m not afraid to die, Nakul, but I don’t see the point of being a fool…’

‘There is no folly in righteousness,’ Dharma cut in. ‘We will not use astra weapons. That is final. Now get back to the matter at hand.’

‘Can’t we combine forces against Bhisma?’ Bhim suggested, more to turn the talk away from the topic of astra-weapons.

‘It’s against the rules of engagement we agreed upon,’ Dhrstyadymn spoke up. ‘We can attack in quick succession and try to tire him out, but only one man may engage another at any point.’

‘That won’t work. Dron and Asvattama have been given the sole responsibility of protecting Bhisma. There’s another problem there and we all know it; but let’s solve this one first. It’ll have to be you, Dhrstyadymn.’

‘I…we… My father owes his throne to Bhisma and so do I. I’m bound by gratitude. I can’t…’

With a dejected groan, Dharma sunk his head into his hands. ‘Is there no one?’ he asked. ‘Does no one dare face Bhisma without fearing for his life or his moral conscience? You have more than a fair chance, Dhrstyadymn. Why, you’re the best of the Panchalas…’

‘And Bhisma has the power of the Wrights at his disposal. Yuyudhana is right. No man can counter that, and anyone who tries faces not just death but also defeat and dishonour. But then what does that matter to you? All you care about is your precious reputation for morality, just as your brother cares for his reputation of victory. And, yet, if I speak of old loyalties it bothers you?’

‘Oh stop it, all of you!’ Bhim snapped. ‘Firewrights, indeed! Shikandin nearly had the Grandsire, today. If Partha had not told him to fall back, he would have…’

‘Don’t be silly, Bhim,’ Dharma said. ‘Bhisma Devavrata is no ordinary warrior. Even the best of the best…’

‘Save your superlatives for your sycophants, Dharma. This war would have ended days ago without Shikandin and it would not have ended in our favour. Would it kill you to admit that he’s more than a match for anyone, leave alone Bhisma?’

‘It takes more than skill to face the Grandsire, Bhim. It takes great courage. Shikandin may be skilled but…’

Slowly, Partha became aware of exactly what his brother was saying. He found his eyes drawn to Shikandin, who stood next to Panchali, visibly amused. He did not quite know what happened to him after that, but the words left his mouth of their own accord, forceful and defiant. ‘You cannot question this man’s courage, Dharma. I have seen him fight, not just these past days, but many times before. I have lost count of the many times he has saved my life. I respect you, Agraja, but please don’t put me in a difficult position: To question Shikandin’s courage is to question my own.’

Dharma cleared his throat. ‘Well,’ he said. ‘That is good to know. But the question remains whether Shikandin agrees with you.’

Partha asked Shikandin, matter-of-fact, ‘Can you…? I mean… can you, especially without astra-weapons?’

The reply was a nod. King Dhrupad swore under his breath, spat on the ground in contempt and walked out of the Command Tent.

As an afterthought, Partha softly added, ‘Will you?’

Shikandin smiled. ‘Yes, I will, and don’t worry – I will kill him.’

Dharma was astounded. He looked, enquiring, at the astonished Dhrstyadymn and then at Shikandin. ‘How? I mean…why?’

Shikandin said, ‘You mean, how am I not bound by gratitude, as my brother is? You see, Dharma, the sins of the father shall always lie heavy on the son. In this instance, that burden is mine to bear…’

8

THE HARSH CLANGING OF SWORDS CUT THE CRISP DAWN AIR OF THE morning. Shikandin stood watching the two combatants as they duelled. Neither man wore armour nor had any weapon but his sword. It made Shikandin smile, though without mirth. This, he expected, was what the honourable war would eventually come down to. Those who claimed to be the greatest of warriors – the graceful archers who prided themselves in never setting foot on the bloody muck of the battlefield – soon, they would all learn to fight like common soldiers. There would be no escape from sweat or blood.

Shikandin drew in a deep breath, and the faint smell of jasmine wafted toward him amid his gory thoughts. He did not have to look to know who was approaching. He also knew that Subadra was there for the same reason that he was. ‘You must be really proud of him,’ he began, gesturing towards the duelling Abhimanyu.

‘Not really,’ she confessed. ‘He’s getting properly beaten right now! I’m rather proud of his opponent though…’

Pleased as he was at the compliment, Shikandin did not reply. He turned his attention back to Yudhamanyu and Abhimanyu as the two young men continued their practice. *There’s nothing like war to bring fathers and sons closer*, he mused. *Shared dreams, shared fears, and the need to make sense of the madness*.

The previous night, after the council had dispersed, Yudhamanyu and Abhimanyu had approached Shikandin. To his astonishment, they had asked to serve as his rearguard when he went into battle against Bhisma. Shikandin had assented on the condition that the two youths would follow his orders without question. Yudhamanyu had not only agreed but had also

stopped on his way out to exchange words that were to the point but far from unpleasant with Uttamaujas.

Subadra's voice intruded on Shikandin's thoughts. 'Yesterday… you didn't explain why. Is it too early to ask?'

Shikandin knew well what she meant. 'It's a long story,' he began. 'You know that Bhisma once brought three princesses of Kashi to marry his step-brother, Vichitravirya?'

'Yes. And the eldest of the three refused, didn't she? I'm not sure what it was all about, but I've heard she asked the Grandsire to marry her and he refused because of his vow of celibacy. It is said she challenged him to a duel…'

'It's a little more complicated than that. You see, Kashi was a kingdom of Firewrights, Amba amongst them. It was why Bhisma wanted her brought to Hastina, as a sign of conquest, and it was also why he refused to duel her. But, as it was, the Grandsire claimed he would not fight a woman, that it was dishonourable to do so. In a last effort to find someone who would dare fight Bhisma on her behalf, Amba came to Kampilya. Panchala, as you might have heard, had once been a land of Wrights and some of our kings themselves were known to belong to the Order… Anyway, that was all very long ago, and our kings, my father included, had earnestly taken part in the Great Scourge. Nevertheless, Amba charged King Dhrupad to keep the old promise that we would always protect and defend Wrights. Of course, my father refused. He claimed that the promise did not bind us anymore, not since he owed his crown to Bhisma Devavrata and the Firstborn. That's another story, by the way, of how Bhisma ousted the last Firewright ruler of Panchala and placed my family on the throne instead… But I'll save that for another day.

'So, when my father turned her away, Amba laid a curse on the heads of Panchala's kings. And she threw the string of Wright-metal beads she wore – the sign of her being a Wright – in my father's face. I guess she was too angry to aim well, because it fell on a small carving on a pillar instead!'

Subadra was startled at Shikandin's sudden jovial tone. 'How do you know all this?' she challenged.

The Panchala prince thought for a moment, then reached inside his tunic to pull out a thin, astoundingly flexible chain of beads made of the silver-white metal that was the hallmark of the Wrights. He handed the chain to Subadra, who reverently examined it. ‘I was a bit of a truant, as a boy,’ Shikandin went on in the same light-hearted way. ‘I was hardly seven years old when I took the beads off the pillar and wore them. By Rudra, that was one thrashing I won’t forget, even after all these years! I thought my father wouldn’t stop till he had killed me…’

‘Is that why…you and your father…?’ Subadra asked.

‘One of the reasons, yes,’ Shikandin confirmed. ‘But there is more. Some say Amba immolated herself, praying that she return as a man in her next life to avenge her torment at Bhisma’s hands. Others say she was captured and tortured, burnt alive. I wouldn’t be shocked if the latter were true.’

Subadra gasped. ‘Surely…?’

‘I’ve seen such things with my own eyes, Subadra. I was once one of the many soldiers who were tasked with hunting down Firewrights. Yet, most of those who died were innocent forest dwellers.’

‘Like Kshtradharman’s mother?’

‘Yes. Hers was a better fate than others of her kind. You see, the women…the soldiers often burnt them alive. The forest dwellers used to believe that the spirits of these women would watch over them, that the power of their pain and sacrifice would protect those who lived. They worshipped the stones where the women were tied down and immolated as they would a goddess. A goddess they call Amba.’

To that, Subadra had no reply. She and Shikandin watched, silent, as Yudhamanyu and Abhimanyu brought their practice to an end. The two young were were now talking, exchanging notes on technique and form. Around them, the sounds of activity grew louder, as preparations for the day’s battle began.

‘Do you really think that killing the Grandsire will bring you peace, Shikandin?’ Subadra whispered. ‘I know you’ve suffered a lot, especially at

your own father's hands, but do you really think avenging yourself against Bhisma will heal those wounds or set back time?'

'It's not about revenge…' Shikandin's voice was hoarse, as he explained, 'Amba – what happened to her was not right. We let her down. The Kings of Panchala failed.'

'But…'

'I can't quite explain, Subadra. I don't believe in curses or magic, but I do believe that the Universe has its own balance. I was not there to prevent her fate, but the truth is also that I have not always done what I can to stop other wrongs from happening. Now I must set it right in whatever way I can. It's a need so deep, that I sometimes feel that the spirit of Amba lives on in me.'

Shikandin took the beads back from Subadra and studied them briefly, as if trying to see the woman who had once worn them. He then slipped them over his head, setting them under the folds of his tunic. 'I've known about Govinda, about his being a Firewright, for longer than most people realize. In fact, what happened in Northern Panchala – the canals and the water wheels that continue to irrigate the land till today – I was as much a part of as Asvattama was. It didn't matter who ruled that land; neither Asvattama nor I cared about that. Our people were dying and Govinda and the Firewrights helped us to save them. I owe a great debt to the Wrights. It is time I repaid it.'

'I am afraid,' Subadra confessed.

'Of what?'

'Of the change that is inevitable! I mean…this is Bhisma, the patriarch of the Kurus and the most respected man in all of Aryavarta. To kill him is to destroy our way of life!'

'You've been listening to Partha rave and rant, haven't you?' Shikandin said. 'We can't fear change, simply because it's unfamiliar. Change is like weeding a garden… But this, the way things are around us, this is an entire maggot-infested tree! No matter how much you prune it, it decays from the inside and the fruits just keep rotting. The tree must be uprooted, chopped and burnt. Destroyed.'

‘But what is lost is lost! Who will replace it? What replaces it?’

‘Nature replaces the tree. Society, humanity will develop a new system.’

‘And what’ll become of us? We too are part of this uprooted tree, like it or not. My son is one of the fruits that grow on this tree. Is there no hope for him?’

‘It isn’t what we are, but what purpose we serve that matters,’ Shikandin said. ‘Whether this tree stands or not isn’t ours to choose. What we must choose, however, is what we shall do when it falls. We must choose what we will be…what our children will be…the putrid, rotten tree that contaminates the soil it grows in, the benign wood that fires the hearth, or…’ he smiled at the thought.

‘Or?’

‘Or we can all be the logs that burn at the sacrificial altar, the sacred wood of the yajna-homa.’

‘Now it seems to me that you’ve been listening to Govinda!’ Subadra’s voice was serious as she said, ‘You’ve thought through all this before, haven’t you, Shikandin?’

‘Yes, I have. I thought it through and made my peace with it a long time ago…’

‘But to kill Bhisma… It is not only dangerous but also…’

‘Dishonourable?’ Shikandin snorted in disdain. ‘Don’t you see? There is no greater weapon than reducing your opponent to nothingness. A man cannot kill the Grandsire, for it would bring dishonour upon him as a warrior. Amba could not fight him because she was a woman and not considered his equal to begin with. I would rather be a eunuch who fights the Grandsire than be emasculated by honour.’

Another silence prevailed, this one uncomfortable. Eventually Shikandin said, ‘I’d better go and find Govinda. We need to run through the battle plan for today. I’ll see you this evening, then.’

‘Rudra protect you Shikandin, and may the sun shine bright on your sword today.’

Shikandin walked away before Subadra could say anything more. He thought he heard her whisper a prayer for his protection, but he did not look

back.

9

PARTHA AND SHIKANDIN RODE INTO BATTLE SIDE BY SIDE. JUST behind them were Abhimanyu and Yudhamanyu, while Pradymna and Uttamaujas rode on their left, Uttamaujas proudly bearing a banner with the sign of his forest people: a gentle dove with falcons' claws. Pradymna surveyed their formation and said, 'This should be good. Any takers on a wager?'

'After where a dice game has brought us?' Yuyudhana bantered.

'What?' Shikandin joined in. 'A Yadu who doesn't want to gamble? That's unheard of!'

'Just for that, fifty gold coins say Bhisma will avoid battle with you.'

'Where's the chance in that?'

Laughing, the men got set to engage the enemy.

By afternoon, it was no longer a matter for jest. Shikandin had been right. It was impossible to engage Bhisma. As soon as any one of Dharma's warriors neared the Grandsire, he found himself suddenly facing Asvattama or Dron instead.

As the battle drew on, Asvattama became Shikandin's shadow. It had become clear to Syoddhan and his warriors that Shikandin now had the task of battling the Grandsire. It had also become apparent that Partha could not bring himself to so much as hurt or disarm Bhisma, for time and again the patriarch came within feet of him and escaped unscathed. Govinda's angry curses could be heard across the battlefield.

Yudhamanyu was equally irate. 'What a waste, Father,' he pointed out to Shikandin as the two men took positions alongside each other, releasing their arrows in tandem. 'The Grandsire would have been dead twenty times

over if that had been you instead of Partha. Instead, here we are, exchanging pleasantries with Asvattama!'

'That is *King* Asvattama to you,' Shikandin corrected, though not unkindly. 'But I must say, Yudhamanyu, you've just given me an idea.'

'What idea?'

'Never mind. Listen to me. I'm going to keep Asvattama distracted while you and Abhimanyu move the three of us into position.'

'All right. But what position?'

'You see Dron there? He's moving directly towards where Govinda and Partha are circling Bhisma. Now, I want you to take us towards the same point. Asvattama is bound to follow, but if I keep him occupied…'

Yudhamanyu was all excitement. 'He'll crash into his father, or better still, into Bhisma!'

'Just as long as he doesn't crash into us. Ready now.'

Hardly had Yudhamanyu and Abhimanyu exchanged hushed whispers and passed instructions on to their charioteers than Asvattama began a fresh attack. 'Perfect!' Shikandin muttered as he began to counter the offensive.

Yudhamanyu cheered as Asvattama reeled under the onslaught. The young man notched an arrow to his bowstring, only to have Shikandin shout at him, 'It is a war, you brat! Follow orders or I'll have you whipped for insubordination! Muhira!' With a mix of trepidation and pride, Yudhamanyu obeyed, as Abhimanyu threw some banter his way.

Shikandin turned his attention back to Asvattama, who had fitted what looked like a misshaped arrow to his bow. Raising his bow, he let free the arrow. A shout went up from Nakul as he saw the attack, for the arrow came in swifter than the eye could see. All over the battlefield, men watched Shikandin. To everyone's surprise, he returned a single arrow. His aim was impeccable. The tip of his arrow hit Asvattama's strange weapon at the precise point where a tightly wound strip of metal was uncoiling loose as the weapon spun through the air. The tiny mechanism jammed for an instant, then went on unwinding. Shikandin's arrow fell to the ground, humble and spent. But it had done its task. What should have been a cluster of tiny barbs hurled into the air, were now pieces of metal falling

harmlessly to the ground. Bereft of all grandeur and awe, the Wright-made weapon was nothing more than a shiny trinket.

Dharma's armies shouted out for joy, making the Grandsire pause to glance in Shikandin's direction. Shikandin caught the movement and realized how close he now was to Bhisma. But another look around told him that Dron and Kripa were closer still. Resolute, he got set to face Asvattama again.

In his languorous way, Asvattama took up another weapon. Again, a single arrow fitted to his bow, Shikandin watched. Despite the intensity of the moment, he could not help but feel a pang of pity. Once, Asvattama had told him that no Firewright student was taught to wield a weapon without being made to memorize the science behind its function, the instructions for the weapon's use. In the aftermath of the Great Scourge, metaphor had morphed into magic, sanctifying and legitimizing the same weapons that had once been spurned, deeming them celestial. And now a disappointed Shikandin saw that just like any other Firstborn-trained warrior, Asvattama too muttered the astra incantation that went with his chosen weapon, as though he were infusing it with some otherworldly power.

In that instant, Shikandin felt doubt hit him anew. When even Asvattama, one of the wisest men and, without doubt, the best warrior he knew had succumbed to the way of life dictated by the Firstborn, what hope did that leave for the commoners of Aryavarta? *Perhaps*, he reasoned, *the existence of the hierarchical ways of Aryavarta was proof that Divine Order is the ultimate purpose of all life. If not, if this were wrong and equality the true way of life, surely things would not be the way they are*.

The distraction proved deadly. Asvattama's bow twanged. Reacting at once, Shikandin let loose an arrow in response. He missed his target by a finger's breadth. Cries of alarm sounded out. 'Father!' Shikandin heard Yudhamanyu shout. But the warning came too late.

Asvattama's Wright-made arrow had now become a bunch of serrated discs, all of which hurtled ominously towards Shikandin. One of the discs cut right through the wheel of his chariot, breaking the wooden axle. His

horses pulled wild, driven by mortal terror. The strain was too much for the light rig to take. It shattered, wood and metal flying in all directions.

Shikandin hit the ground with a hard thud, raising cheers of victory from Dron and Kripa. The battlefield erupted in the frenzied madness that inevitably accompanied the fall of a commander or notable warrior. Asvattama stared, expressionless, at what remained of his opponent and his rig. Only when the dust had settled completely did he allow himself the faintest of smiles.

Shikandin was nowhere to be seen.

10

‘HOW KIND OF YOU TO PULL MY ARM OFF!’ SHIKANDIN SAID, though his tone lacked complaint. His chest racked in a great cough as all the dust he had swallowed came back up to his mouth. He spat it out with a grimace, paused to gather himself and then he was ready. He still held on to his bow, but the bowstring had broken during the fall. Shikandin pulled out a spare string from his waistband and began fitting it to his bow.

Partha stared, incredulous. He just could not understand how Shikandin had survived Asvattama’s arrows as well as the fall from his smashed chariot, and now stood dominating the small confines of their battle-rig with his towering height. Nor could he figure out how Govinda had known exactly when to turn their vehicle, scramble onto the rig’s crosspole while holding the reins in one hand, and hoist Shikandin on board using his other hand as they raced past where he lay.

‘It’s a long story…’ Govinda said, in response to the unstated question. ‘Later. Are you ready, Shikandin?’

‘Yes.’

Partha understood. Govinda alone could get Shikandin close enough to Bhisma Devavrata for the latter to strike. All he needed was the brief time it would take for Dron and the Grandsire’s protectors to realize that Shikandin did not lie dead under the debris of his rig, as they would have expected. A low murmur rolled across the battlefield as everyone saw that this time the attack on Bhisma was of a different nature.

The Grandsire raised his bow. He cast a reluctant glance at Partha, and then pulled out a silver-white weapon that resembled an arrow but was thicker and clearly heavier. With a whispered incantation and an obvious

snarl, he fired. Partha began to cry out a warning to his companions, but before he was finished, Shikandin let loose a defensive arrow. The sleek shaft sped through the air and hit Bhisma's heavier weapon with a sharp crack. It took some time for those on the battlefield to realize that not only had Shikandin's arrow managed to render motionless the mechanism of the silver-white weapon, but it had also hit it at a weak joint, smashing the weapon to pieces before it could pose any threat. Bhisma glared at his new attacker, his intentions clear to all on the battlefield: Partha or no Partha, he would no longer show his enemy any mercy.

'Watch out!' Govinda warned. 'He'll go for something bigger now…'

Shikandin nodded, again releasing his arrow at exactly the right instant. Despite his precise aim, the shaft was no match against Bhisma's Wright-weapon, a horror unlike anything they had seen before. Ominous serrated blades emerged from the tip and shaft of the arrow, spinning as the weapon twisted through the air, but they did not detach into many pieces. Instead, the single, malicious projectile came unerringly towards Shikandin and his friends. Partha released a slew of arrows at the object, trying to destroy it, but the spinning blades made short work of the shafts. With a loud, unearthly whine, Bhisma's weapon continued to fly towards the three men.

'Hah!' Govinda yelled as he swerved at the last moment, causing the horrendous mechanism to hit just the tail end of the chariot. Partha was thrown about from the impact, but Shikandin took the worst of it: Barbed prongs slashed at his chest and arms, ripping skin and flesh from bone. The pain seared through him like fire and his body burned as nerves and muscles were slashed to shreds. He could hear Govinda calling out to him, but found himself too breathless to reply. Through blurred eyes, he saw Bhisma readying another of the deadly projectiles with a satisfied countenance. Then Shikandin's eyes shut of their own accord, and the image of the world beyond his closed lids began to fade.

The sins of the father…

I now burn, as Amba did. Rudra, let my death mend the broken promises of the Panchala kings, let my house be redeemed. Spare my siblings and my sons. Let this end with me.

He reached out into the blurred haze around him. His fingers touched melted flesh and bare bone, and the acrid smell of burnt skin flooded his nostrils. Amba, he knew, was calling to him; she held out her blazing arms to embrace him, to burn him on her stone pyre. He laughed, the sound hollow in his ears, and surrendered to her call. Willingly, Shikandin drew the fiery image in his mind closer, till he was one with the flames. Her bead necklace felt cool against his skin.

‘Shikandin!’ Govinda’s voice was calling him from somewhere in the distance. ‘Come on! We didn’t make it through everything for us to die this way, out here. Shikandin! Get up! Get us out of this mess. You’re the responsible one, remember?’

Shikandin wanted to laugh at that statement, years of memorable companionship turning into the happiness of the present, but it came out as a guttural, rasping noise. Nevertheless, he opened his eyes.

‘Get up!’ Govinda urged him, loud and clear, shaking his shoulder as though he were asleep.

At length, Shikandin found the strength to speak. ‘Help me up,’ he said, blood seeping out from between clenched teeth. ‘If you don’t mind, Govinda – the horses?’

Partha helped Shikandin to his feet, as Govinda turned the horses around to make another run at Bhisma.

Shouts went up from the battlefield, the uncertainty of what was to happen holding each sound suspended in mid-air. Dron and Kripa were already at Bhisma’s side and were ready to engage the opponents, but the Grandsire waved them aside. Partha looked from Shikandin to the Grandsire and back to Shikandin. The wounded warrior could barely stand. His breath came in a wheeze, suggesting a broken rib, possibly several.

‘What…’ Partha began, but then stopped. With a grim draw of breath, he took up his weapons and aimed at the Grandsire in a reluctant attempt at defence. After what felt like a long time, though it was not, Shikandin too raised his bow and reached out for an arrow. His actions were smooth, as though he felt no pain. Partha was briefly relieved, more at not having to

attack Bhisma than at Shikandin's ostensible recovery, but then realized their position was no different for it.

'It won't work, Shikandin,' he said. 'Those things the Grandsire has are of Wright-make. The others are right; we can't counter astra weapons without astra weapons of our own. This is a lost cause…'

But Shikandin's mind was elsewhere. His long, matted hair streamed loose in the wind and a placid smile played on his face. Bhisma hesitated, but the sentiment passed and he let loose his astra-arrow. Once again, the deadly weapon made its way towards Shikandin and Partha.

Govinda held their course steady, showing no signs of dodging or swerving.

'You're mad, both of you!' Partha shouted.

Govinda chuckled. 'There are some things in the world more powerful than Wright-work, Partha. Like madness.'

'Or,' Shikandin finished, 'justice.'

In the blink of an eye, Shikandin tore the chain of beads off his neck, twisted it around his arrow and let the shaft loose. Before anyone could breathe, another arrow, black-tipped and adorned with feathers, followed. He watched as his makeshift missile made its way through the rain of arrows on the battlefield, and shattered against Bhisma's astra and dropped to the ground in pieces, its work done.

The Firewright chain, however, had wrapped itself around Bhisma's twisting weapon, the beads as hardy as the astra. Blades and wheels strained with the effort to spin but the beads held it tight. With a final groan, the body of the astra snapped and the heavy missile fell, bounding over the battlefield in a last bid for lives before finally coming to a stop.

Govinda tugged at the reins, slowing his horses down as a lull fell over the battlefield. All eyes were on Bhisma, as the patriarch stared, uncomprehending, at the destroyed astra. And then Bhisma toppled over from his chariot-rig to the ground.

Shikandin's second arrow, made from the black-metal of kali, its tail feathers gifted by the birds of the Eastern Forest, had pierced the Grandsire right through his heart.

11

HOSTILITIES CEASED FOR THE DAY AND A RESTLESS PEACE TOOK over the field. A crowd, quiet for its size, had gathered at a corner near the riverside. Partha sat on the banks, weeping loudly despite Bhim's and Nakul's attempts to calm him down. In the middle of that sombre group, Bhisma Devavrata, patriarch of the Kurus and veteran of innumerable battles, lay dying. Syoddhan and Dharma both stood respectfully by the Grandsire's side, listening attentively to all that the old man had to say.

At length, Bhisma finished his instructions and mournfully noted, 'Who can resist the tides of destiny? Yet, it is in the name of submission to destiny, to Divine Order, that we fight each other. Is there any chance of peace, my sons…?'

Dharma and Syoddhan shared a long glance and then shook their heads to say there was none

'Then,' Bhisma said, 'you'd better get back to your respective camps. You have much to do. I cannot wish one of you victory over the other, but hope that together you'll do this family proud. Fight fair and fight well. My blessings are always with those who uphold morality and justice.'

Syoddhan was quiet, but his eyes held a clear, dark pain. Dharma, on the other hand, let his tears fall openly. The two men drew back so that the others gathered there could honour the fallen Elder. Every noble who was at Kuru's fields was now present at Bhisma's deathbed. All save Vasusena.

If the dying patriarch noticed the King of Anga's absence, he did not comment on it, focusing instead on whispering apt messages and words of blessing to those who now paid him their respects. For Panchali he had only an elaborate sigh as she bowed at his feet. She ignored the lack of words

and stepped back into the crowd, showing only the humility and composed grief that were expected of her. Bhisma watched her go, his mind wandering to another bold woman he had known once. With some effort, he caught himself and forced all anger out of his mind. That was in the past. He was now ready to die. But he would go with honour. He crooked a finger, calling Dharma to his side. ‘I want to see those three…’

‘Yes, Grandfather.’

The crowd parted and the awed silence that it held disguised many emotions, from rage to admiration, misery to pride. As one, all eyes followed the three men who walked up to where the Grandsire lay. Politely, they waited, as the dying man ran his eyes over them – Govinda, who returned the gaze with boldness; Partha, still tearful and penitent, and a heavily-bandaged, limping Shikandin, whose humble arrow was still wedged deep within Bhisma’s chest. With each breath the fallen patriarch took, the arrow threatened to rent his heart and end his life.

Bhisma managed a weak sneer and said, ‘Shikandin, is it not?’ He continued without waiting for an answer, ‘Don’t fret, my boy. I hold nothing against you. You see, this was destined. Just as it was destined that Amba – my nemesis of old – would face me again, in your form. She told me that in one lifetime or the next… Ah, how then could I truly fight you… deep inside your man’s body you hide a woman’s soul. This isn’t your arrow that kills me, Shikandin. This is simply my destiny, the fulfilment of an old promise. And so I hold nothing against you or your kin.’

The statement drew a palpable sigh of relief from Dhrupad, who went down on one knee next to Bhisma and took the patriarch’s bloody hand into his own, glaring at Shikandin with unfettered hatred.

Shikandin made to speak, but before he could do so Bhisma addressed Partha. ‘You are a great archer, my son. It’s an honour to have gone down in fair combat against you…’

Partha was shocked. ‘Grandfather, I…’

But Bhisma would have none of it. He had one last barb left to deliver. ‘Shikandin! Here.’ He feebly held up a bloody string of beads. ‘Come closer; take back what is yours. My blessings go with you…’

Shikandin felt his heart pound as he realized what the Grandsire meant. Then, holding his breath, he hobbled forward. He bowed as best as he could with his injuries, took the proffered beads and stared, forlorn, at them. Then, placing them back around his neck, he walked away without another word.

‘Svasti! Enough now, all of you,’ Bhisma said. ‘Get back to your work, and leave an old man to say his final prayers. My blessings, such as I may have left to give, go with you all.’

The crowd dispersed. Govinda was one of the last to leave. As he walked away, he noticed Vasusena arriving, Sanjaya alongside, to pay his respects to Bhisma. The two men studied each other before Sanjaya ushered Vasusena along. Govinda moved away, thinking. He had no doubt that Bhisma’s fall would leave Syoddhan with no choice but to ask Vasusena to join the battle. Indeed, he was quite sure that Bhisma himself would make the request before his conversation with Vasusena was done. What that also meant, was that Dharma’s forces had a new and mighty enemy to face in the days to come.

He was about to walk on, when he heard a soft voice behind him: ‘Poor Shikandin…’

Govinda spun around, his eyes blazing.

Sanjaya continued, unconcerned. ‘After all that he has done for you, his reputation has come to nothing. His valour has come to nothing. How many more will you destroy this way, Govinda, before you yield? You turned traitor, destroyed us all – or so you thought. But see, we’re back and we’re more powerful than ever. Or will you now pretend you don’t know who Vasusena truly is? Today, I have the authority of the Firstborn and the might of the Firewrights at my feet! Suka and Devala both dance to my command, and past and future will be as I decide to tell it. Why do you still resist? Let me make you an offer. Accept, and this whole tragedy can end now!’

Govinda said, ‘I have no doubt that I won’t resist, but you stir my curiosity. And since I think we are done with battle for the day, I might as

well let you entertain me. Speaking of battle, I don't remember seeing you on the field. Still playing messenger boy?'

Sanjaya did not rise to the bait. He said, 'You know what happens now…now that the old man has fallen.'

'Suppose you tell me.'

'Bhisma Devavrata was the cornerstone of Dwaipayana's elaborate system of control over Firewright technology, his way of harnessing its power by placing it in the hands of an elite few. Now, with Bhisma gone, the harness is broken. Anybody and everybody who has a weapon at his disposal will seek to use it or barter it for power. You know as well as I do that each king and vassal lord hoarded what they could of Firewright-made weapons, whether they understood the use or not. Now countless astra-weapons will emerge from the dust of hiding. We stand on the brink of a new system, a new society, where Firewright might – our might – is the core of everything. Needless to say, Dharma Yudhisthir and his kind have no place in the new world. As for you…your time is running out, Govinda. I would not put it past Dharma Yudhisthir to have you beheaded in an act of penitence before he gives in to his despair. Or maybe he will let you live, but what a miserable life that would be, without kith or kin or allegiance.'

'And,' Govinda said, 'in your kindness, you wish to offer me an alternative?'

'Come over to our side. I know there are secrets, things that Ghora has taught you that you alone know. Do you realize what a powerful man you would be in the world I seek to forge? All that you could want: land, wealth, respect…why, even the woman you want – and don't bother denying it – can be yours. The winners make the rules, Govinda; they write history. Be a winner. Be one of us.'

With a soft smile, Govinda replied, 'No.'

'Why not? Do you still think Suka and Dwaipayana can turn the tide in any way? All they care about is their precious Books of Knowledge, and they will gladly do what it takes to see that endeavour through. But the price they pay for that will be high; they will have to legitimize us, the

Firewrights, as the ultimate authority. This feud will end, Govinda. How can you not want that?'

'Do you really care for my explanations, Sanjaya? You just want what you want of me. My answer still remains no.'

Sanjaya studied Govinda. 'The Secret Keeper. You place your faith in the one who refuses to stand by you. You're a fool, Govinda. I'm telling you again, join me. Together we can destroy the Secret Keeper before he destroys you. Suka will have no choice but to help us…'

'Shut up, Sanjaya.'

'I repeat: Govinda, you're a fool.'

'A stupid fool, I'm happy to add.'

'And how many more will pay for your stupidity?'

Govinda's eyes were undecipherable. 'Millions, Sanjaya. The very Universe will pay. Now, I think you'd better go and offer your respects to the Grandsire before you end up preceding him in the afterlife.'

12

A FRENZIED, FEVERISH EXCITEMENT RAN THROUGH DHARMA'S camp as the armies readied for the next morning's battle. With Bhisma gone, there was, many believed, a chance at victory. Now and then, some group of soldiers or the other would take up a victory chant in Shikandin's name and drink to him around the campfire.

Dharma had first insisted that discipline be kept, and liquor be forbidden that night, but Dhrstyadymn had assured him that the gain in morale was worth the chance of a solider or two getting hopelessly drunk. Eleven days had passed since the war began, and they were down to a little less than a quarter of their strength. Morale was now paramount. And the man who had revived that hope, who could drive it higher, was missing.

'I can't find him anywhere,' Dhrstyadymn reported, walking into the command tent.

'Me neither,' Yudhamanyu replied. 'He's not with Kshatradharman and Uttamaujas.' Turning back to Panchali, he added, 'This is so unlike Father.' Panchali smiled. As with Shikandin, she too had not yet had her fill of listening to the boy address his father with such familiarity and respect.

Dharma, however, had no time to be pleased or amused. 'What's wrong with him? Where could he have gone? The men are clamouring for a glimpse of him, and he's gone missing!'

Panchali asked Dhrstyadymn, 'Have you tried Father's tent?'

'The King's tent? But why would Shikandin go there…?'

Panchali stood up. 'I'll find him.'

Panchali walked over to Dhrupad's cluster of tents, slowing down as she heard voices from inside. Rather than intrude on the conversation, she decided to wait for an opportune moment. Hardly had she perched herself on a wooden supply trunk a few feet away when Shikandin stormed out Dhrupad's tent, angrier than she had ever seen him. Before she could say anything, her brother's long strides had taken him out of the camp and towards the fringes of the surrounding forests. Panchali ran behind him.

'Shikandin!' she called out, as she followed him to a small grassy plain. 'Shikandin, wait!'

He finally turned around. 'What're you doing here, Panchali?' he snapped. 'Go back. Leave me alone!'

Panchali did not reply but continued to make her way towards her brother till she stood in front of him, panting for breath. 'You…you walk fast, you know,' she gasped. 'Really fast! Hai! I wonder how any woman would agree to go for a stroll with you, Agraja! No wonder your romances die out before they begin – it must be far too tiring for the poor things…'

Shikandin managed a chuckle. Panchali saw how deeply hurt her brother was that he did not laugh as he was wont to. 'Talk to me, Shikandin. Please?' she urged him.

'What's there to talk about, Panchali?'

'I'm neither blind, nor deaf, Shikandin. Besides, I know – Subadra told me. And, I also heard what the Grandsire said to you, earlier. …'

'All my life, Panchali,' Shikandin slowly began, 'I've been used to being the one who's wrong, the one who's a disappointment. It's something I don't talk about or pay attention to anymore. I just don't understand why, this once, it bothers me… I've always been an outcast, a misfit…'

'No!'

'Do you remember your childhood, Panchali?'

She fell silent. In all these years, not once had Shikandin spoken about her past, about the fact that she was not his sister by blood. A pang of guilt, of regret, flashed through her as she realized that she had opened that door with her own deed, her own barter with the Secret Keeper. 'No,' she said.

‘Then imagine,’ he said, reaching up to touch the beads around his neck. ‘Imagine being a child, being made aware that you are somehow different, even if you don’t understand it. Imagine growing up hating yourself because you are a shame to your family, and then hating yourself more because your family is the biggest cause of your shame.’ Shikandin paused, gritting his teeth to contain a pain he could not name. ‘Then, you’ll know what I feel. Then you’ll…’

As the weariness and despondence of years hit him like a physical blow, he slid down to his knees, slamming his clenched fists into the ground. ‘The old saying goes that the child must pay for the sins of the father,’ Shikandin said. ‘I’d reconciled myself to the fact that Yudhamanyu hated me, as I’ve hated Father – I had no right to expect otherwise. But then, when you and Dhrstyadymn… I’ve wondered for so long now; since the day you were married to Dharma. What if, Panchali? What if my errors, my sins now weigh over you? Where does this end? Perhaps, if I’d been a better son, a better brother, a better man, you would not have suffered the way you have. Can you forgive me…?’

Panchali knelt down and settled her elder brother’s head on to her lap, as though he were a child. Shikandin did not protest. He curled his body tight and let the tears come, the way he had not in all his life. Panchali wrapped her arms protectively around him, wiped away his tears, combed his long hair with her fingers and rocked him till he fell into a deep sleep. She stayed awake, gazing alternately at Shikandin’s worry-worn face and the night sky above them till the morning star rose in the east, warning them of the impending dawn. Then, gently, she shook her brother awake.

Shikandin awoke and sat up, for a while retaining the blissful equanimity he had found in sleep. It was replaced quickly by the throbbing memory of what had happened and what awaited him still.

Panchali said, ‘You look very handsome when you’re asleep, you know. Hardly like the wild creature you really are.’

Unwilling to break that fragile happiness that they shared, Shikandin remained silent, but as a tip of flame breached the horizon, the words slipped from his mouth: ‘Who am I, Panchali?’

Panchali considered his question. ‘You are my brother, Shikandin,’ she answered. ‘You are my brother, but you have cared for me and protected me as a father would his daughter. You are a warrior, a great warrior who brought down the mighty Bhisma in a battle that you know in your heart to be fair. You are the son of King Dhrupad, Dhrstyadymn’s brother and Govinda Shauri’s friend. You are a prince of the Panchala kingdom, a prince loved by his people. But above all that you are Shikandin, a man who dared speak for the voiceless when no one else would… You’ve dared to do what was right, no matter what it cost you and…’

Shikandin placed a quick kiss on his sister’s forehead, cutting her short. Panchali looked up at him, willing him to see the love and respect she had for him. Then she was back on her feet and pulling at his hand. ‘Now stop lazing around and get up. There’s more battle to be done, and our armies need their bravest warriors to lead them.’

Shikandin stood up. Arms linked, the two siblings walked back to the camp, cheered by the sight of the bright banners fluttering in the wind.

13

SYODDHAN WALKED INTO HIS COMMAND TENT, CONTEMPLATING the insignificant decorations and trappings that he had not noticed before, for no other reason than to avoid the obvious void left by Bhisma's fall. Yet, there was only so long that the inevitable could be ignored. He stared at the ornate silver-white throne that had, upon his command, been brought all the way from Hastina, the sole ceremonial seat in the otherwise functionally appointed Command Tent. It stood at the head of the arrangement, the metal gleaming gold in the first light of the sun.

Even though this was his war, Syoddhan had spared no effort in letting everyone know how much he respected the Grandsire, Bhisma Devavrata. It had been a reasoned decision as well as an emotional one, for Bhisma's support was the ultimate endorsement of morality and fairness that anyone in Aryavarta could wish for. Bhisma had not only legitimized Syoddhan's war, but he had also made Syoddhan feel justified, empowered, and complete in a way that he had longed to feel since childhood. Now Syoddhan realized that in their own ways grandfather and grandson had cared about each other, after all.

What next? What do I do? Where does this path lead? Guide me, Grandfather… He rested a wistful hand on the silver throne. *What if more loss, more pain is all that lies ahead. Perhaps we should think about peace…*

The notion stirred anger, a heated rage as red as the blood that had covered the fallen Bhisma, soaked into his silver mane. *A warrior does not fear loss, he does not fear pain. I cannot let Bhisma's death go in vain!* Yet,

Syoddhan could not completely dismiss the doubt he felt, as though he was no longer sure what he really fought for.

A warm hand landed on his shoulder. ‘You must choose,’ Dron’s deep voice sounded in his ear.

Syoddhan turned to face his teacher. ‘Is there really a choice, Acharya?’

‘There is always a choice. We both know that Bhisma loved Dharma and his brothers just as he does you and yours. Yet, he chose to fight for you for because he believed there was a principle at stake; a principle you too believe in, do you not?’

‘I did and I still do. Dharma’s terms, trivial as they might have been in form, would have served to undermine the very system that Aryavarta is built upon.’

‘And if those terms have changed?’

Syoddhan said, ‘Perhaps it is time we find out.’

‘How?’ Dron asked. ‘I mean, even if we send a negotiator to Dharma, it will be Govinda’s words that come out of Dharma’s mouth.’

‘Govinda, Govinda. I don’t know whether it is amazing or terrifying what one man can bring an entire realm to. What is more irksome is that I cannot, for the life of me, understand what he wants.’

‘It isn’t all that complicated,’ Asvattama said, as he walked into the tent. The other commanders, including Dussasan, Vasusena, Kritavarman were with him. Each one took their usual seat in the tent, but not before letting their eyes drift to Bhisma’s empty throne. Syoddhan remained standing, a hand still on the silver chair. But for that singular absence, their council of war was complete. He directed his attention back to the matter at hand. ‘You were saying, Asvattama…?’

‘We assume that Govinda has some ulterior motive towards which he drives all events. Yes, that does seem typical of his character as we’ve always known it; except that he is no longer the same man, is he?’

Dron was not pleased with his son’s candid speech. ‘Get to the point, Asvattama,’ he snapped.

‘What if all Govinda wants is what he says he wants.’

‘Which is?’

‘To change the way things are. To change the realm’s reliance on hierarchy and Divine Order. We assumed that his words are mere rhetoric, and that his intent is to seize power for himself. But what if he means what he says?’

‘That would make him a bigger fool than you!’ Dron snapped.

‘With all due respect, Father, that may be the beauty of his plan. We find it inconceivable, unthinkable, for we are taught to believe that the world is immutable but human beings are not; that the story remains the same but the players change. The Wheel of Time spins: there is beginning and there is end. But why does the Wheel of Time spin? Is it some divine force that propels it? Or is that force humanity, people in search of change and a better way of life? I do not say that Govinda is right, but I do think that he is honest when he claims that he wishes to see a different way of life prevail in Aryavarta. His demand, that the ouster of Dharma Yudhisthir be nullified, is not about making Dharma the Emperor once again as it is about saying, loud and clear to all in Aryavarta, that there are basic dignities, a fundamental freedom over the self that no one can control, usurp, trade…or gamble away, no matter what their authority and their place in the hierarchy.’

The observation left the others stunned, more for the fervour of Asvattama’s words than their content. Each person present knew that Asvattama could not have said what he just had in Bhisma’s presence. But now that the Grandsire was gone, words and deeds would become plain. Dron shivered with controlled wrath, torn between wanting to discipline his son and hesitating to do so in front of everyone. Kripa laid a calming hand on him and continued the discussion in his stead.

‘The point you make is pertinent, Asvattama, for it shows Govinda Shauri to be a greater danger than we had thought. It is one thing to use rhetoric, as you called it, to disguise one’s intentions, but to think of questioning the existence of Divine Order – that is beyond heathen, it reeks of evil. I understand now why things have come to this pass – to be honest, I have had my share of doubts as to Suka’s lenience or foresight, as it may be, in allying with the Firewright Devala Asita. But when faced with a

possibility that the world as we know it may change, we must find that which unites all and hold true to it.'

Syoddhan said, 'Which brings us back to where this discussion began. I do believe that Dharma may share our principles, our view of Divine Order, and if we consider what Asvattama says, it is imperative we explore the possibility. But is it even thinkable to have a frank discussion with Dharma, free of Govinda's influence?'

'What if we speak to him, or one of his brothers, alone?' Dron proposed.

'How would that be possible?'

'It would be if we captured one of them alive.'

Syoddhan said, 'If anyone is capable of doing that, it is you, Acharya. You must lead us now.'

Dron said, 'I'd be honoured. But I'd also be remiss in that duty if I did not raise caution along with the promise of victory. Now that Bhisma Devavrata no longer fights, I fear that Dharma and his kinsmen may be less reluctant to engage in battle. There are old wounds that can be reopened and old feuds that may be resurrected on the battlefield. Dhrupad has not forgotten his defeat to me, and the need for vengeance is strong in his son, Dhrstyadymn. Bhurisravas of the Yadus and his kinsman Yuyudhana also have old scores to be settled. Sudakshin of Kashi… The list goes on. Many stand on either side for personal reasons, and it may not be possible to hold them back any longer. At the least, we should expect that Dharma will not be able to restrain those who fight for him. Eventually, the enemy, too, will begin to use astra-weapons.'

'So it gets more violent and bloody,' Dussasan said. 'All wars come to that, sooner or later.'

'Yes, and I'd rather there was less blood on our side.'

'What do you suggest, Acharya?' Syoddhan asked.

'If Divine Order is to be preserved, then nothing that can help us is profane or inappropriate. Much has been hidden over the years for fear of it falling into the wrong hands. Some, like the Naga-astra, are as good as lost. It may be worthwhile to uncover such treasures, despite the risks involved.

Never in the history of Aryavarta since the Battle of the Ten Kings has there been a greater need, a greater cause, than this.'

'You don't mean…'

'I think,' Kripa ventured, 'what my brother-in-law is trying to say is simple. Those once trained by Firewrights don't merely wield weapons, as Bhisma Devavrata did. We make them too. It is a pity that Devala is not here. Something tells me that many of the hurdles Dharma faced during his Imperial campaign were his doing.'

Syoddhan turned to look for Devala, then remembered that he was yet to return from the task Asvattama had sent him on. Even so, to speak so openly of the Firewright as an asset was another thing that could not have happened in Bhisma's presence. It made Syoddhan realize he needed to focus, to face the future and not mourn the past.

'Very well,' he declared. 'Whatever we can do to win this war shall be done. I assume acharyas Kripa, Dron and Asvattama, too, have a lot to offer on this count. But there is one matter that I still wish to discuss. Acharya Suka. Should we not ask his opinion, too, before we proceed?'

Sanjaya said, 'We cannot afford the time, Your Highness. But in any case, if he were here I am sure he would agree with this proposal. After all, is he not the one who believed that the ends justify the means? Isn't that right, Acharya?' He looked pointedly at Dron, then at Asvattama, and back again at the former.

'Absolutely right, Sanjaya,' Dron said. 'You're absolutely right.'

14

ABHIMANYU WAS ON HIS WAY TO THE COMMAND TENT FOR THE morning meeting when he heard the sound of a low whistle. He stopped in his tracks, visibly surprised, when he saw Uttara waving to him from inside a supply tent. Grinning with anticipation at what he expected was a romantic encounter, Abhimanyu made his way over to where she was.

The moment he entered the tent, he pulled Uttara close, rough and passionate in his embrace. ‘Kama help me, Uttara, I just can’t get enough of you,’ he whispered, becoming vaguely aware that she was laughing and protesting at the same time. He looked around him, to be greeted by stifled laughter and irreverent remarks from the group gathered in the tent.

‘Kama help me. Kama help me,’ Uttamaujas imitated him in excess before adding in his usual tone, ‘I think Kama owns you body and soul, Abhimanyu!’

Hidimbya, though equally amused, was less taunting. ‘Never mind him, Abhimanyu. After all, it takes a married man to understand…’

‘He is right,’ Pradymna joined in, ‘besides, we are in the presence of a lady.’

‘Oh, did we offend you, Pradymna?’ Uttara joined in the banter, spurring a fresh round of guffaws.

‘Well, what is this about?’ Abhimanyu asked, sitting down on a bundle of rope.

‘Ah! It’s a meeting of the younger warriors, as it were,’ Pradymna said as the others settled down.

‘Younger? That rules you out, doesn’t it?’

‘Be serious!’ Uttara swatted Abhimanyu’s arm.

‘All right, all right. Seriously, what’s going on?’

Hidimbya and Uttamaujas exchanged glances. Then Uttamaujas said, ‘Bhagadatta’s elephants. We may have found a way to deal with them.’

‘If you’re going to suggest astra-weapons…’ Abhimanyu began, impatient.

‘Us? Astra-weapons?’ Hidimbya said, raising an eyebrow.

Abhimanyu was apologetic. ‘Well, you should be having this conversation with Dhrstyadymn and Uncle Dharma right away…’ He paused as the problem that the warriors had gathered to discuss became apparent to him. ‘You think they won’t listen to you?’

‘Uncle Dharma won’t listen to us,’ Hidimbya said. ‘Don’t deny it, Abhimanyu. You’ve already seen how he treats Uttamaujas, how they all do. I don’t hold it against them, it is what they have been brought up to believe. As for me, I haven’t been to the Command Tent even once as yet, and you know why Govinda thinks it best to keep my presence discreet for the time being. So…’

‘You need me to pass this off as my idea?’ Abhimanyu said.

‘Yes.’

Abhimanyu appeared distinctly uncomfortable at the prospect. He turned to Uttara, as though seeking her advice. She said, ‘I’ve lost two brothers and many more of my countrymen, Abhimanyu. Unless we find a way to counter Bhagadatta…’ she finished with a helpless shrug.

Abhimanyu laid a reassuring hand on hers. ‘So, this once, does the end justify the means?’ he said, as though talking to himself. He looked at the others. ‘All right then, what’s the plan?’

Uttamaujas said, ‘Well, in most battle arrays elephants are used as defence or the second line of attack. It is only when their numbers are high that they are placed at the frontline – as in this situation. What we have been doing, our armies…it’s not wrong. Since horses are easily frightened and cavalry is no use against elephants, our infantry has been using spears and lances to attack the elephants in their abdomens. But the risk we face is high – elephants are weapons of war in themselves, but when they carry

archers on their back they also work as moving towers, giving great vantage to marksmen.'

'Right,' Abhimanyu affirmed, not bothering to ask where and how Uttamaujas had learnt so much about warfare and that too in such little time. 'So in such cases, there are typically two strategies available to the less powerful army – either they find a way to turn the elephants back into their own lines, preferably get them to run amok and attack their own men. The Yavanas, I've heard, set pigs or other small game afire and release them into the elephant herds. Some say it's the flames, others say it's the squealing of the pigs – but whichever it is, it works. There are others who recommend cutting the elephants' trunks off…'

Hidimbya was visibly disgusted. 'Don't tell me you…'

'No chance, Chief. Uncle Govinda would send *me* squealing and running if we do that. Sometimes I think he cares more for animals than he does for humans.'

'Which I completely understand and agree with.'

'Getting to the second option,' Uttamaujas continued, 'we can capture elephants – particularly those that carry single warriors. And where the elephant is not to be tamed by its captor, a single arrow or a dagger to the neck, just in between the ears, will suffice to kill the animal without causing great suffering. We've been trying that, as well as the expected defences, including digging trenches and setting up stakes. But…'

'But you have a third option, don't you?' Uttara said.

Hidimbya said, 'I don't suppose you've ever been charged at by a wild elephant?'

'I can't say I've had the pleasure.'

'No loss, Mahamatra. The thing is, once you get an elephant to charge, it is very difficult to control it, make it change direction or bring it to a stop. A herd of elephants all the more so, because they follow their leader.'

Uttamaujas added, 'The point is, if we can cut off the main elephant in Bhagadatta's attack – Supratika, I think that magnificent bull is called – then the other elephants will be easier to deal with.'

‘If you’ve noticed,’ Abhimanyu said, ‘Bhagadatta never allows Supratika to be in the lead. The elephant and his mount are always in the centre of their formation. How do you suppose we can get through their first and second lines to reach Supratika?’

‘Aah. What if we don’t get through? What if we *let* them through instead?’ Uttamaujas said, a smile spreading across his face.

‘I don’t understand,’ Abhimanyu said, turning to him.

Uttara’s smile matched Uttamaujas’s as she explained, ‘I think he means we shall have the pleasure of being charged at by an elephant after all.’

‘*This* is your plan?’

Abhimanyu was not sure whether Dharma was questioning the feasibility of the proposal or his claim of ownership over it. Not wanting to lie, he confirmed. ‘Some of us came up with it…’

‘Some of us?’ Dharma was unconvinced.

‘It’s not a bad idea,’ Bhim intervened. ‘If the first part of it works, then I’m confident I can get through to Bhagadatta.’

‘If, Bhim, if. Who dares face a herd of charging elephants? Who dares trust their lives to a whimsical plan?’

‘Those who’ve trusted their lives to us on less,’ Abhimanyu said. ‘We shall put the Matsya and Panchala infantry in the lead. The plan depends on getting Bhagadatta to spread out his elephants in one huge charge. We’ll have to position ourselves carefully.’

‘And once the first part of the plan goes through? Once Supratika falls or is captured? What of the other elephants? Who is to say they won’t run riot?’ Sadev asked.

‘We need to use the terrain carefully. If we can get them near the river…’

Dhrstyadymn considered the situation, his brows furrowed. ‘It won’t be easy…the formation, but it can be done. What do you say, Govinda?’

‘I think,’ Govinda said from his customary position next to Panchali’s seat in the corner of the tent, ‘that the future of Aryavarta is bright if the next generation of its leaders is capable of courage like this.’

Hardly a muhurrta later, the eleventh day of battle began. Abhimanyu and Uttara rallied the combined forces of Matsya and the Panchala forest-dwellers with the help of Uttamaujas, Shikandin and Bhim. Dhrstyadymn had decided that the forces would march out in a half-circle formation, a tepid but not inappropriate counter to the crane attack array Dron had formed. What he intended to do eventually was to pull forward the centre of the half-circle to form a wide, straight frontline, which Bhagadatta would be tempted to run down with his elephants. Acutely aware that much could go wrong between the plan and its execution, he moved up and down the ranks on a horse, making constant adjustments for every variation of the unexpected that could possibly disrupt their plans.

'Do you think Acharya Dron will…' Uttara began, watching the obviously tense Dhrstyadymn, as she rode into formation on Abhimanyu's rig.

'He will,' Abhimanyu affirmed. 'The crane formation uses its head and centre – in this instance, the positions occupied by Bhagadatta's divisions – to break through enemy lines, and then the crane's wings swing in to trap the enemy from the side. Uncle Partha and Uncle Sadev already command the edges of our half-circle, in anticipation of an attack from the sides. As for Bhagadatta…'

'He is where we want him,' Uttara said.

'Yes, but you are not. Do you really have to fight on foot today, Uttara?'

'I need to be with my soldiers, Abhimanyu.'

'Yes, but…'

'I'll be fine. We may be spread wide but our lines are still more than a hundred deep.'

'Which is no use if you decide to stand in front of the hundred men and not behind them.'

'Stop worrying! I…' Uttara had no more time to reassure Abhimanyu, for she could see Dhrstyadymn's flag-bearers riding up and down the ranks, signalling for the army divisions to take their final position. She smiled and slipped over the side of his rig without another word, weaving her way through the marching soldiers to join her unit. Abhimanyu did not watch

her go. He kept his eyes straight ahead, on the enemy. He knew that the best way to protect Uttara was to do his share in the battle and to do it well. Still, he could not help but send up a silent prayer for her safety. He suspected that despite her apparent unconcern, she would do the same for him.

‘I’m surprised he let you go,’ Uttamaujas told Uttara the moment she reached her position. The two of them were in the middle of the infantry formation, flanked by their best soldiers on either side. On them lay the responsibility of beginning and ending the deceptively simple movement of troops that would, if all went as planned, isolate Bhagadatta’s command elephant. Once that happened, Bhim, who rode along the flanks of the half-circle, would be able to cut in from the side and deal with the beast. As for the rest of the elephants… Uttamaujas smiled at the thought.

Yet, anyone who knew the first thing about battle knew that there was nothing simple or easy about moving thousands of men in and out of formation, that too while under attack. ‘The lines must hold,’ Uttamaujas said, more as a reminder to himself than to Uttara.

She nevertheless replied, ‘They will hold.’ Her conviction, however, gave way to a mix of doubt and irritation as she saw Dharma Yudhisthir ride up from their left and past them, till he took up a position not too far from the first line of Uttamaujas’s unit. ‘What is he doing here?’

‘I have no clue.’

They did not get a chance to find out further as the trumpets trilled yet again, and the flag-bearers signalled, as had been agreed, for their formation to come to a stop. From where they were, both Uttara and Uttamaujas could see that Dhrstyadymn had brought the entire army around the battlefield and to the side so that the river was behind them. Lest Dron suspect why he did so, Panchali had suggested a feint – men had been sent well before dawn, ostensibly to dig trenches into which stakes could be placed and the river diverted.

For a while, all was silent and still, oppressively so. There was no wind, and sweat trickled down every face, for more reason than just the warm sun.

Whispers of ‘Steady, steady’ ran up and down the lines, and the soldiers’ breathing seemed loud and laboured. They waited.

It began as a sound, an even beat that should have been soothing in its consistency but for the fact that the very earth echoed with its force. Uttamaujas, Uttara and their men felt it first in the pit of their stomachs. Then it rose up as fear, pure fear, to race in their hearts. Nearby, a soldier let out a whimper of terror, and another began a loud prayer. Gritting his teeth, Uttamaujas began to tap on the ground with the butt of his spear with all the courage he could summon. Next to him, Uttara joined in beat for beat, till one by one every soldier around them had taken up the defiant rhythm, a song of valour to accompany their stand. A trumpet trilled yet another command, but it was lost in the surge of noise that followed.

A wave-like boom, but not quite, as though it was thunder that flowed and not the sea. The earth shook, first in the fearful imaginations of men and then in indisputable reality, and the best of soldiers quailed as the situation became apparent: Dron had given Bhagadatta the orders to charge down the enemy. The smell of urine filled the air, as did the stink of vomit. A brief cry went up as a soldier fainted. Uttara barked an order to the rest to stand firm. Uttamaujas smiled to himself as he heard her cursing like a hardy soldier. And that was all the levity they had time for.

‘Forward!’ They heard Dhrstyadymn shout out the command in the distance. It was taken up by the heralds and echoed over the entire army.

‘Forward! Forward!’ Uttara and Uttamaujas rallied their units to rush ahead till they heard the command to stop. With a precision that would have been the envy of the best-trained armies in the realm, the combined forces of Matsya and the forest-people came to a halt. The half-circle had extended into a single straight line. They were close enough to hear the orders being called out on Bhagadatta’s side, to spread out the elephants and crush the entire enemy front at one go. And then the penultimate signal as the mighty tusker Supratika rallied his elephantine kin with a trumpeting call that rumbled through to each corner of the battlefield.

‘Stone and Tree protect you, Princess,’ Uttamaujas said, smiling at Uttara for what he knew might well be the last time.

‘Rudra protect you…*Prince,’* she replied, enjoying the look of surprise it brought to his face. She added, with affection, ‘Fight well, my brother.’

And then the elephants were upon them.

Even a man of the forests such as Uttamaujas could not help but feel frightened at the sight of the solemn, heavy beasts charging at him. He found himself thinking, in a detached way, that there was a more primal and real quality about this fear than what one otherwise felt in battle. It grew as a single elephant filled his field of vision, charging down barely a spear’s throw away. He could see the bull’s eyes, reddened from the liquor it had been given to spur it on. The animal’s trumpeting call filled not just the field outside but shook through Uttamaujas’s body as though he were hollow.

‘Hold! Hold!’ Uttamaujas urged his soldiers. He knew it went against their every instinct to not let their weapons loose against the mammoth, but they had to wait till it was too late for the enemy to see their plan.

Just as he feared that even his disciplined forces might lose their nerve, he heard Dhrstyadymn blast the arranged signal on his war conch. ‘Now! Move, move!’ Uttamaujas urged his men to move right, while Uttara got her troops to move left. All over the battlefield, the widely spread troops of Dharma’s army parted, clustering together in planned precision to create hundreds of corridors that would let the line of elephants through.

It did not always work perfectly, and Uttamaujas heard the gut-wrenching screams of those who met their death under an elephant’s foot. Those at the very front of the formation, especially, had little time to get out of the way. The smell of blood and freshly crushed flesh spurred the animals on further in their maddened run, and their riders’ efforts to control them, to get them to move sideways into the clustered flanks instead of along the corridors between them, went completely in vain.

Uttamaujas began running towards the battlefront, as he knew Uttara and other section leaders were doing, all over the battlefield. They had one more important task to finish before this part of the plan would be complete: Bring down the enemy soldiers on as many charging elephants as possible. That way, left to their devices, the animals would run through

Dharma's army, into the open space behind them and right to the river's edge. There, the elephants would stop. Their war-rage spent, they would slowly return to the natural, peaceful state of their kind. After that they could be easily captured or, as Uttamaujas hoped, led back into the wild.

But first, the soldiers, Uttamaujas reminded himself. Seeing his chance, he flung his spear at the mahout guiding the elephant nearest him. The man took the spear in his chest and toppled over, but one of the six archers on the elephant's back immediately took his place. Cursing, Uttamaujas reached for his bow and let fly three arrows in quick succession, two of which found their mark.

'Get down!' Uttamaujas felt Sthuna's hand on his back, pushing him aside just as an arrow shot through the air where his head had been but moments ago.

More arrows rained down on him and his men, released by the surviving men on the nearest elephant, as well as the archers on the other four elephants that had charged into the corridor formed by his and Uttara's troops.

'Let go of me, Uncle!' he shouted, and jumped back on to his feet and into the fray. 'The riders, get the riders,' he cried out, reminding and rallying his men at once. Then he began exchanging arrows with the enemy.

Two of the elephants on Uttara's side of the corridor were now riderless. It did not take long for Uttamaujas to see why. Uttara was sacrificing her men, ordering them to set up a continuous barrage of arrows at the moving targets instead of pausing to take aim. Immediately Uttamaujas turned to the forest people around him. 'Stand firm. Shoot at will. Don't stop!' He took a position right at the very edge of the flank, setting arrow to bow with a will. He was vaguely aware that Sthuna was next to him, but there was far too much tumult for him to make out anything more.

A cheer further down the line told him that the strategy had worked. Two more elephants were now riderless, and the beast that had led the charge had cleared the ranks completely. Soon, the bull would reach the river's edge, where the waters would cleanse his blood-stained tusks and addled mind. With a renewed vigour Uttamaujas began running behind the

last remaining animal. Many of his soldiers were with him, as were some of Uttara's men. It was then that he realized with a shock that Sthuna was not among them.

Uttamaujas slowed down a little, his concern taking the edge off the fight for a moment. But before he could turn back or scan the mass of bodies of the living and the dead for his uncle, he heard Uttara shouting to him to leave the last elephant to the others and get back to the frontline.

Uttamaujas turned and began moving towards the front, counting his remaining arrows as he ran and then, with a curse, strapping away his bow away and drawing his sword. Without breaking his stride, he pulled a spear out from the flesh of a dead soldier – one of his own men – but went on without sparing regret or remorse. The battle was far from over, for they had yet to face the greatest of dangers: the might of Supratika.

15

THERE WERE ELEPHANTS, AND THEN THERE WAS SUPRATIKA. BARDS all over Aryavarta had sung of the majestic tusker's allure, but in a rare twist of reality, truth had outdone imagination and praise. Even at a distance, Supratika took one's breath away, not just by his size and presence, but an air of nobility that was distinctive among men and unparalleled amongst beasts.

Bhim, Uttamaujas and Dharma, all three stared wide-eyed at the gigantic bull-elephant, no exception to the awe he inspired. Bhim, on the left flank, was the first to react. He instructed his rig-driver to speed in from the side, right into Supratika's path, just before the elephant could enter the human corridor and lay waste along it. It all happened very quickly after that. Bhim's horses neighed in fear and tried to bolt; the rig hurtled through the air to land, overturned, in the charging elephant's way while the rig-driver was caught under the debris.

Supratika's great tusks tore through two of the trapped dapple-brown horses while the third came under his mighty feet. With a jerk of his head, the mammoth threw the impaled horses high into the air. The stallions were dead when they hit the ground. Tusks red with blood, the smell further fuelling his battle-craze, Supratika brought down one giant foot on the overturned chariot-rig and then the other, crushing wood and metal as though they were chaff, leaving no trace of the rig's former occupants. Trumpeting loudly, the pachyderm kicked the debris out of his way and headed right into the heart of their army, turning Uttamaujas's orderly unit into a mindless, fearful mob rushing to get out of the tusker's way.

‘Bhim!’ The name sounded out as an otherworldly shout, one that held loss, disbelief and inestimable pain. It came from none other than Dharma Yudhisthir. He stared at the remains of Bhim’s rig, at the dead horses and men strewn around it, and at the brave but helpless Uttamaujas, who was trying valiantly to rally the soldiers. His gaze finally came to rest on the blood-maddened Supratika.

‘Stand firm! Stand firm!’ Dharma blazed with a sudden fervour, as though his brother’s fall had brought forth in him a new fount of courage. He guided his rig through the dispersing men, gathering them to him into a simple but defiant wall that he meant to place in Supratika’s way. ‘Spears! Man your spears! For Bhim! Fight for Bhim Vikrodara!’ he cried out.

A pained yell sounded in the distance, where Hidimbya and his people faced two more elephants that charged headlong in the space between their ranks. Dharma did not understand who shouted out or why, but between their call and his, the forces from the Eastern Forest rallied once more. They clustered around him in a narrow but deep formation, one that would certainly slow Supratika down, though at the cost of a great number of lives. It was an opportunity, one that could not afford to be wasted.

As awareness of the fact dawned on him, Dharma raised his war-conch to his lips and let out a series of long and short blasts that echoed across the battlefield in a call for assistance. Confident in the knowledge that others would certainly finish what he now started, he drew his bow and began to engage Bhagadatta. It was not, Dharma mused in that detached way of a man who knows his death is imminent and so has nothing left to fear, a dramatic battle. All he had to do to get to the Pragjya king was release arrow after arrow and bring down the guards clustered around Bhagadatta in the turret mounted on Supratika’s back. In the meantime, Supratika continued to storm ahead, picking off men and beasts at unexpected leisure for his enraged state.

‘You must leave now, Your Highness. I’ll hold the line.’

Dharma turned at the voice in his ear, to see Uttamaujas, his hair matted with blood, his dark skin beaded with sweat, next to him on the rig. Drawing his simpler bow, the forester repeated, ‘If your life is lost, Your

Highness, all this will have been for nothing. Bhim's death will have been for nothing. Please…I need you to move out. Now! A horse waits.'

'Two bows are better than one,' Dharma replied, and turned back to the enemy. Supratika was close enough for the two of them to smell the tusker's musk, the salt-and-earth tang of his temporal juice and the blood of men. It was intoxicating and frightening at once.

'Your Highness…' Uttamaujas protested again, but he was cut off by another voice.

'He's right,' Govinda said, pulling up behind them, 'Two bows are better than one, but better still are three.'

'Especially,' a dour Partha added, notching an arrow as he spoke, 'when it is our dear brother we avenge.'

Dharma did not reply, but grunted with satisfaction as the Gandiva's rhythmic twang filled the air.

The flurry of arrows the three archers set up slowed down Supratika but did not stop him.

'I can't see Bhagadatta,' Uttamaujas suddenly said, 'What if… what if he is not there?'

'He is, he must be,' Govinda replied. He sat back, his rig now a stationary object in the charging elephant's path. His eyes flickered, sad, over the wounds on Supratika's body, the pain in the elephant's red eyes.

'It's too late…' Partha said. 'I don't understand how…'

He did not have to explain further, for they stared, astounded, as a new kind of activity on the turret answered the incomplete question: Men, dead from well before Dharma and Partha's arrows had pierced their bodies, tumbled off Supratika's back like humansized dolls, pushed by their comrades, who had remained hidden from sight and protected from shafts by the closely-placed cadavers of their fallen fellows.

'It's a trap!' Dharma exclaimed.

'An old trap indeed,' Uttamaujas said. 'And one I should have foreseen. We of the forests are not strangers to this trick.'

'Nor are we of the Central Lands. But to hide behind the dead is…'

'Ingenious,' Govinda completed.

They watched as Bhagadatta’s archers took their positions and notched arrows to their bows. ‘We can still get them!’ Partha cried out, and began to let loose his shafts at great speed. Dharma and Uttamaujas followed suit, and the latter called out to the men to release arrows, spears, whatever weapons they bore, at the enemy.

Supratika let out a blaring call that knocked Uttamaujas down with its sheer force. The heat of the tusker’s breath was upon them like a formless flame, an overwhelming wind. Dharma shouted, wordless and defiant as a mighty trunk snaked towards them, filling his entire vision. Partha let fly a last, desperate arrow, and Uttamaujas closed his eyes as a smile spread on his face at a final thought of his home. Govinda grit his teeth as he remained motionless, gazing into Supratika’s eyes, his own shifting shades as a host of thoughts flashed through his mind. He gasped out loud as he noticed the immeasurable pain that flooded the elephant’s red eyes.

Supratika faltered, the moment a shock to Bhagadatta’s men as well as to Dharma’s soldiers. With a great, silent shudder, the tusker toppled over sideways, shattering in his impact, like the crushing fall of a great tree. Several sounds rose in the air at once – cries of fear and pain from those hurt and trapped under the elephant’s huge bulk, shouts of anger and command from the now-visible Bhagadatta that caused his men to scramble to ranks, and the sudden flurry of weapons and men as those of Dharma’s army who were closest to the newfound quarry met them in battle.

But one throaty call, nothing less than a lion’s roar, stunned them all. Ally and foe alike watched as Supratika’s bulk split open in a gory spray of blood and entrails. Through the cut emerged the bright metal of a sword, dripping red. And then, slashing and cleaving his way through, all the while growling with the exhilaration of what he had done, emerged a man drenched in the animal’s blood.

‘How?’ a stunned Uttamaujas asked. ‘The ropes!’ he concluded. ‘The ropes that fastened the turret to the elephant’s body! Bhim must have hung on to the ropes on Supratika’s underbelly, waiting for the right moment to strike his vitals through the softer skin!’

‘Your surmise is as good as mine,’ Govinda said, shrugging as though he were watching a moderately entertaining play. He remained as he had been all the while, having moved neither in fear nor in relief at all that had just happened.

Bhagadatta rallied the few men he had left to make a last stand. ‘Get him!’ Dharma commanded Partha. ‘I’m going to help Bhim. Uttamaujas, stay on your rig and keep a lookout.’ With that, he jumped off his rig. Partha followed.

‘Should we?’ Uttamaujas made to get off the rig despite Dharma’s instructions.

Govinda said, ‘Don’t bother, it’s done. Look…’

Partha had already felled Bhagadatta’s soldiers, and was now duelling with the Pragjya king. It may have been an injury the king had acquired from Supratika’s fall, or perhaps Partha had found fresh strength in knowing that Bhim was alive and well, but the battle did not last long. Before they knew it, they heard Partha crying out, triumphant, as he thrust an arrow into his opponent’s body using the shaft as he would a dagger. The arrowhead went right through Bhagadatta’s heart and the king fell forward, his lifeless arm coming to rest on Supratika’s trunk in a final gesture of affection.

Bending down, Partha hacked the fallen king’s head off his body and held it up high for all their men to see. Then, letting the severed head fall to the ground, he ran over to join Dharma and Bhim in a joyful reunion. Around them, the soldiers started cheering and laughing, those glad to be alive all the more delighted to have victory to show for it.

As the news of Bhagadatta’s death and Supratika’s fall spread over the battlefield, the rest of Dharma’s forces found the last surge of strength they needed to deal with the remaining elephants of Bhagadatta’s force. Some animals were killed, a few were rallied by their keepers to retreat to safety for future use, but most were diverted to the river’s side, where they had now begun to settle into gentle herds, their broken armour and drying bloodstains the only indicators that they had ever seen battle.

The flames of Supratika's large pyre cast their warmth into the distance, and Govinda, Partha and Bhim could feel a mild heat on their cheeks; a sensation that would have been soothing but for its origin.

'A fine beast and a fine man,' Bhim said, staring into the glow. 'It is fitting that they share their final journey on the same bier.'

'I can't believe what we have done,' Partha added. 'First the Grandsire, now Bhagadatta. He was not our kinsman, but he has been our friend. Without him we could not have built the Empire…and now he is dead, and you and I are the reason for his death. Just as we are the reason for so many other deaths – including those of our friends. Sthuna – I never realized how much that crippled forester meant to Shikandin or Uttamaujas…'

The pain of their loss flared as anger through Partha and he turned on Govinda, next to him, 'How can you live with it, Govinda? How can you live with knowing that you are the cause of death and misery and bloodshed. How can you let this go on?'

Govinda did not react at once. He stared, expressionless, at the activities in the distance. At length, he said, his tone conversational, 'Imagine that you have nine men struggling to lift a large rock. Strong as they are, they fail. Then you have someone like, say, Bhim here, who decides to give them a hand. And the rock moves. Would you say that Bhim is the reason it does?'

'But of course! Without him, the nine men could not have lifted the rock.'

'Without the nine men, without even one of those nine, *Bhim* could not have lifted the rock. Doesn't that make each one of them as important as him?'

'What do you mean, Govinda?'

'No one person is the cause for or consequence of all that happens. I am just the tenth man, the threshold, the turn in the tide. I stand here on the shoulders of humanity, a mere instrument of Time.'

Bhim frowned, then nodded, as though he had understood a part of what Govinda had said. Partha looked thoughtful, too, but less confused. 'Do you

remember,’ he said, ‘long ago, in Dwaraka, I asked you what I was responsible for…’

‘And I told you that you were responsible only for yourself. Yes, I remember.’

‘Did you…did you think then that it would come to this?’

Govinda sighed and turned to the two men. ‘If I had, Partha, I’d have died a hundred times over than let it happen. But I made my choices then, and I make them now. I shall have to live with both.’

A short silence reigned as the three men meandered into their respective thoughts, and then Bhim said, ‘What now, Govinda? What happens tomorrow?’

Govinda was bitter. ‘Battle. More battle happens. What else could?’

16

‘HOW? I STILL DON’T UNDERSTAND HOW,’ JAYADRATH SAID. HE and the other leaders of Syoddhan’s army were once again gathered around the empty silver-white throne, poring over parchments on which Dron had drawn out the formations planned for the next day.

‘Ask the proud teacher,’ Vasusena said. ‘Dhrstyadymn is, after all, his pupil.’

Dron shook his head. ‘My pupil he may be, but I’d be remiss to dismiss his talent. That man has battle strategy in his blood. It is as if he was brought up for one reason and one reason alone: to fight. Indeed, I wish he had been my son…’

Vasusena glanced at Asvattama before he could stop himself. Asvattama appeared unconcerned, as though his father had said nothing of consequence. Dron went on, uncaring of his son’s presence, ‘In the morning, the half-circle against my crane formation…simple and brilliant. And the way Dhrstyadymn held the formation in place while he faced me, one on one… I have no words for that. And then, when I thought he had excelled himself, he realigned his troops into a modified crane formation to counter my sakata-vehicle formation. That young man is a military genius!’

Jayadrath said, ‘If we are done praising the enemy, can we get on with discussing tomorrow’s strategy?’

‘It’s late,’ Dussasan said, yawning. ‘We should sleep.’

‘Sleep?’ Syoddhan snapped. ‘How can you sleep? How can any one of us sleep? Isn’t that right, Acharya? Or is your conscience at ease, despite having failed to achieve what you said you would, and losing our greatest strength to show for it? What happened to all your talk of new weapons?’

Dron drew himself up to his full height and faced Syoddhan. ‘Weapons cannot be forged to meet your whims, Syoddhan. We did what we could, and we shall do more. As for my assurance of bringing you a captive, I do not deny that I have failed. But don’t you dare doubt me. Need I remind you that this day has been better, by far, than the last ten? Despite Bhagadatta’s fall, we have effectively reduced the enemy by half, in a single day. Consider where they stand now compared to when this war started. Might I also add that any victory of note, any battle that has been won since this war began, has been through my efforts and those of Acharya Kripa and Asvattama, and not through the efforts of *your* precious kinsmen or friends.’

‘I…’

Jayadrath intervened, ‘We apologize, Acharya. And Syoddhan, this is no time to let anger get the better of us. We must stand united. Consider this: We have the larger army – we began with eleven akshauhini to Dharma’s seven, and the bulk of our forces are largely intact save for Bhagadatta’s elephants. Dharma’s forces, on the other hand, are heavily depleted. We outnumber him four to one.’

‘Depleted? I have lost nearly thirty of my brothers, most of them today, at the hands of Bhim. The man who can conquer elephants, they are calling him, and singing his praises. Who sings for my brothers, who sings of their bravery? Depleted, you say? How many brothers has Dharma Yudhisthir lost?’

‘And that is precisely the point. Dharma and his brothers, their kinsmen and friends, all trust each other. We, on the other hand… Well, look at us. Look at you this very moment.’

Vasusena added, ‘Jayadrath is right, Syoddhan. We must trust each other and work together if we are to win. It doesn’t matter what our personal feelings and animosities may be. We must remember we are all in this together, for what we believe. We are in it for you.’

Syoddhan nodded. He turned to Dron. ‘My apologies, Acharya.’

Dron accepted the apology with grace, and let the matter go. ‘Shall we run over the plan one last time, then?’ he said, adding, ‘I must admit, I am

tired…' He proceeded to quickly review the salient details with practised efficiency, making sure that each unit commander knew what was expected of him.

Hardly any of the warriors present could hide their awe. Even the rough Dussasan was moved to respect. 'Is this possible, Acharya?' he asked Dron. 'Truly, this formation is…it is spectacular, beyond anything I've ever seen or heard of…'

The compliment pleased Dron. 'My ancestors were not mere metal-smiths and peddlers of potions, Dussasan. They were great thinkers and strategists. This formation is the pinnacle of their martial science. Dharma won't know what hit him. At best, we will capture one of their key warriors alive.'

'At worst?'

'At worst, we will leave the warrior dead. But there is no escaping this formation. Not unless…'

Jayadrath said, 'Govinda Shauri will be nowhere near it. Susarman will take care of that. Kritavarman, too. Kritavarman, particularly, leads a battalion of Govinda's own men; a cult of warriors all sworn to fight as one till death.'

'I don't want any mistakes, Jayadrath. If anyone knows anything about the formation I plan to use, then it is probably Govinda. Partha, who heard of it from me, may not have the same depth of understanding. But I fear Kritavarman won't take Govinda to be a serious threat…'

'He'll take Partha seriously enough. I've told Kritavarman that Partha must be kept away from the centre of the battlefield at all costs. Naturally, Govinda will be with him. Susarman of Trigarta, too, is itching for a chance to redeem himself after the defeat he suffered in today's battle. He'd die rather than let it happen again! With him standing in their way, that cowherd and his friend won't be good for much tomorrow.'

'Well done! You remember what I told you? Good! Now there's just one last thing left…' Dron glared at Asvattama, who met his father's gaze but maintained his inscrutable expression.

Jayadrath stepped back, the act a sign to the others. Bidding Dron a good night, all the commanders left the tent one by one. Finally, father and son were alone.

‘Well, *Your Highness*,’ Dron began, scathing.

‘Father, please!’ Asvattama protested.

‘Father? Yes, I thought I was your father. I thought I was your teacher, too. But I’ve now realized that you think your allegiance lies elsewhere… What gratitude or loyalty can be greater than that of a student to his teacher and a son to this father, I wonder…’

‘Father, I beg you. Please…’

Dron placed a hand on his son’s shoulder, the gesture more intimidating than affectionate. ‘Are you really my son…*Little Rudra*? Then prove it. Prove it in tomorrow’s battle. With Govinda distracted, Shikandin will surely make a stand against us. Kill him! Kill them all! Prove your loyalty – as son and student – with the enemy’s blood.’

Fighting back every emotion, Asvattama willed composure onto his face. ‘Yes, Acharya.’

‘Good. Now, it will be your responsibility to get the troops into the formation tomorrow. Don’t forget, begin moving them into position only after you’ve confirmed that Govinda is too far away to interfere.’

‘Yes, Acharya.’

Dron neither acknowledged the assurance, nor did he wish his son for the night. He simply walked out of the tent without another word.

Asvattama sighed and threw himself into the wooden chair that was his customary seat during their meetings. For once, though, he let himself slump in its depths, one long leg tossed irreverently over the carved wooden armrest. He dismissed the attendant who came in to put out the lamps for the night and sat staring into the flames till dawn. Half his thoughts lay on the future, on the inevitable slaughter the day would bring. The other half rested, despite his efforts, on the past; on the fact that he had been nothing but a disappointment to his father all his life.

17

‘WAKE UP, YOU LAZY MUHIRA! THE MUSTER SOUNDED OUT A while ago, and… oh Rudra!’ Yudhamanyu walked into the tent but immediately backed out as Abhimanyu scrambled awake, drawing a shriek from the bundle of sheets next to him. Uttara’s sleepy face appeared from under the sheets, embarrassment dawning on her face as she realized that the entire camp was astir.

‘We’ve overslept!’ she whispered to a still-dishevelled Abhimanyu, who looked around him in a daze.

‘Err…may we come in?’ a politer voice asked.

‘Yes…No! Wait!’ Abhimanyu called out as Uttara got out of bed and quickly got dressed. ‘Yes, you might as well…’ he then said, clearly not too pleased at the prospect.

Pradymna walked into the tent, a beaming Yudhamanyu by his side.

‘You were right, it’s her,’ Yudhamanyu admitted. ‘Here.’ He held out a small purse, which Pradymna doubtfully weighed, then tucked away.

‘That’s done,’ he said. ‘Later, Mahamatra.’

‘Wait!’ Abhimanyu was incredulous. ‘What was that about?’

‘Oh, that was just a small wager on the identity of your secret companion these past some nights,’ Pradymna explained, ‘though I admit I had the advantage of prior knowledge. So,’ he turned to Yudhamanyu, a cheeky grin on his face, ‘what’s his excuse for being late for the meeting at the Command Tent today? A snapped bowstring?’

‘He’s going to need more than that. I don’t think the two of them are going anywhere for a while. How about a broken quiver, with arrows tragically scattered?’

‘Hmm, that could work. Unless, Abhimanyu, you’d rather we tell the Council that you have a bad stomach…you know, indisposed and all that…’

‘Please, Pradymna. An upset stomach sounds so unromantic.’

‘You’re right, Yudhamanyu. But won’t the young lady need an excuse too?’

‘Oh, I think she can take care of herself…’

‘If the two of you don’t mind….’ Uttara took the banter in her stride.

‘Oh not at all, Mahamatra, we don’t mind at all. Now, with your permission, we shall leave you two love-birds alone,’ Pradymna said, leading Yudhamanyu out. Their laughter could be heard for a long time, fading eventually into the distance.

‘We’re late! I need to get ready. My armour’s still in my tent.’ Uttara made to leave.

‘Forget it,’ Abhimanyu said. ‘Come here.’ He pulled Uttara into his arms again.

‘For a quick kiss?’ she teased.

‘A kiss and more. I intend for us both to be very, very late for the muster today…’

Abhimanyu felt time pass in a pleasant daze long after Uttara had left him. He arrived at the Command Tent feeling guilty, but also quite pleased. As he had expected, the troops had left for the day, but to Abhimanyu’s surprise Uttara’s horse was also not in the stables – she had managed to join her divisions with only a little delay. He smiled to himself at the thought of his determined wife, wondering how she had been able to apply herself to the task of leading forces when he knew well that she had enjoyed their intimate morning as much as he had, but his mirth gave way to concern when he found Dharma, Shikandin and Dhrstyadymn inside the Command Tent, along with Virat, Dhrupad, Bhim, Nakul, Yuyudhana and Sadev. Nearly all the commanders were back at camp. Panchali and Dhaumya were, as always, present, and so was his mother, Subadra.

‘What took you so long? Where have you been?’ Dharma began, as soon as he noticed Abhimanyu.

‘Let it be,’ Dhrstyadymn said. ‘We’ve got more urgent things to discuss. The armies cannot hold their defensive positions any longer. We need to give them orders, and soon.’

‘What orders can we give them? Do you know what to do now, Commander?’ Dharma snapped.

‘I don’t,’ Dhrstyadymn confessed. ‘To be honest, I’d always thought that the wheel formation was more of legend than reality. At the end of the day, one can spout theories and principles all they like but organizing the wheel takes sheer genius, not to mention great leadership. Dron has truly proved that he is the best strategist of our times, maybe in all history.’

‘Never mind the adulation,’ Yuyudhana said. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘Do you have any suggestions?’

‘Yes. Let me take a single horse and go find Govinda. Of course, if he doesn’t know what to do…’

‘He does,’ Abhimanyu suddenly spoke. ‘Uncle Govinda knows how to form and break the wheel. And I suspect that Acharya Dron expects him to know. What else could explain the fact that most of the unit commanders are here right now, but for my father and Uncle Govinda?’

‘He’s right,’ Dhrstyadymn said. ‘Our lookouts and scouts report that Dron has drawn Partha right to the other end of the battlefield. The entire Samsaptaka clan of warriors stands between them and us. This would explain why. Even if you tried to take a message through, Yuyudhana, I doubt…’

‘That leaves us where we started,’ Dharma said.

Abhimanyu hesitated, then said, ‘Not exactly.’

‘What do you mean?’

In response, the young man stepped up to the huge table and took up a piece of parchment. ‘The idea of the wheel,’ he began drawing on the parchment as he spoke, ‘is to force the enemy between two fronts, and crush them in between. As you all must have seen, the arrangement begins with one battalion or division in the middle. This is the metaphorical hub of the wheel. Around it, you have spokes – more battalions, each with their

backs to the hub and facing outwards in different directions. At the edges are the rims. These divisions are spread out wide, unlike the spokes, which are concentrated lengthwise.'

Bhim scowled. 'That is a complex formation, no doubt. It must be tough to move it – what if we do nothing? What if we don't attack and simply wait for the enemy to break out of the Wheel?'

'No,' Abhimanyu said. 'The wheel is an attack formation. What happens is that each division, each man, moves diagonally, making the wheel rotate as a whole and come forward at the same time. See…' He drew some more lines on the parchment as he continued to explain. 'Assume we wait for them to come to us. The first division of their wheel would hit our front at an angle, like a wedge. We would be forced to move in an arc. By then their second division – the neighbouring bit of their rim – would hit our arc from the other side. We'd be crushed between the two segments of their rim.'

'What if we attack? We can break through between segments or divisions…' Dharma said.

'Which is precisely what the enemy hopes we might be tempted to do. It becomes easier for them to catch us in between. You see, Uncle Bhim, we tend to think of these battalions as usual, stationary groups that move only on command. But in the wheel formation, nothing is stationary; the divisions are constantly moving. Imagine twenty thousand elephants bearing down from your left, while you're already fighting with a front on your right…'

Every face turned grim, as it became clear what Abhimanyu was talking about. He continued, 'Uncle Govinda said that it's unimaginably difficult to get this formation right. It takes, as Dhrstyadymn rightly said, a military genius, an excellent commander. But, if it's well done, then…' he shrugged.

'Then, there's no way…?' Dharma asked, in a small voice.

'There is…' Abhimanyu said. 'But I know just a part of it…'

'How?' Bhim asked, excitement creeping into his voice.

'Well, if you go in between the rims…that is, any two divisions of the wheel, quickly enough… Instead of engaging with the first two fronts here,'

he pointed to the sketch he had drawn out, ‘if you kept going, breaking through the gap, you wouldn’t be stopped till you reached the hub or the central division of the formation. Once the centre is destroyed, you can start breaking the wheel from the inside out, but… I’m sorry; I don’t know how that’s done.’

Dharma pursed his lips and studied the diagram before him. ‘But you know how to get in? How to break into the wheel?’

‘Yes…’

‘Fine. You lead us in then. We’ll be right behind you.’

‘No, Dharma! This is too dangerous…’ Shikandin protested.

‘Nonsense. We’ll be right behind Abhimanyu. Once we are all in, the formation is as good as broken. We can take it from there.’

Dhrstyadymn began, ‘Dharma, I don’t think…’

‘By Hara, what’s gotten into you all?’ Dharma shouted, silencing the murmurs. He glanced around, meeting each one’s gaze, daring them to object. However, he could not bring himself to look at the visibly horrified Panchali.

‘I’ll ask you once again, Abhimanyu. You do know how to break into the wheel formation, right?’

‘Yes, I do. The trick is to hold off the enemy to both sides instead of waiting for attack from the front. It’ll take a lot arrows, but well-supplied as we are by Matsya’s forges that is hardly a constraint for us.’

‘All right,’ Shikandin said, ‘I shall lead the attack then. Get our armies into position. Abhimanyu can tell me once again how it’s done, and *I’ll* break into the Wheel.’

‘And since when does a Prince of the Kurus need an irreverent woodsman to lead him?’ Dharma snapped. ‘Abhimanyu is Partha’s blood. He’s *my* son and heir to *my* throne. He doesn’t need you to show him how to fight!’

‘This isn’t the time for whatever grudges you may bear against me, Dharma. What you’re asking Abhimanyu to do: it isn’t brave, it’s foolish. He will some day be a great warrior, a better fighter than all of us put together. But to be that warrior, he must live and learn!’

Dharma ignored Shikandin and turned instead to Abhimanyu. ‘Are you afraid? Be honest! Or do you believe the rumours that the Firewrights can control the eclipse and use it to infuse power into their astras? You call yourself Abhimanyu Karshni, of the line of Krishna the Dark-skinned, Govinda Shauri’s son. Don’t tell me you believe in such irrational tales…?’

Panchali stood up meaning to speak, but Dharma held up a hand. A strange air came over Abhimanyu as he looked from one to the other. He declared, resolute, ‘No, Your Highness, I don’t believe in such tales. I am not afraid!’

‘Then it is settled. Lead us.’

The commanders stormed out, ready for battle. Dharma gave a sign, and heralds trilled orders out to the waiting armies, to make ready to march.

Abhimanyu went up to Subadra and Panchali. ‘Wish me well. I shall see you both in the evening, then.’ He began walking towards his battle rig.

Subadra took a few dazed steps forward and stood staring at Abhimanyu as he issued instructions to his captains. ‘Rudra, please don’t let him be hurt,’ she prayed out loud.

‘Don’t worry,’ Dhaumya’s voice, dull and lifeless, sounded behind her. See, Shikandin is with him.’

Despite Dharma’s insults, Shikandin had no intentions of letting Abhimanyu break into the wheel on his own. The two men now had their vehicles alongside, and Shikandin was, to Abhimanyu’s amusement, issuing firm instructions to both their horsemen.

And then, with a cheerful wave at those who remained behind, Abhimanyu was gone.

‘Don’t tell me Dharma has sent a *boy* to break this formation!’ Vasusena said to Dron, as they watched Abhimanyu and his men move, determined, towards the rim of the wheel. He added, ‘He can’t, can he?’

‘No, not unless…’ Dron hesitated, but then said, vehement, ‘No, he can’t. But he is a grown man, and it wouldn’t do to underestimate him either. Far too many have paid with their lives for that mistake in these past days.’

‘I don’t like this. Shikandin is with him…’ Dussasan observed.

‘We’d better inform Syoddhan. Where is he?’

‘With the rearguard. He wanted to make sure that Partha and Govinda don’t head back here at any cost. He’ll be here any time.’

‘And till then?’

‘He left me in charge,’ Dussasan gleefully informed Dron.

‘Very well. Get Asvattama and Jayadrath ready with the flanks. Tell them to strike at the middle of Dharma’s formation. That way, we can split them into two groups and trap them.’

Dussasan grinned again at the prospect of the ensuing carnage and left to do Dron’s bidding.

18

ABHIMANYU NOTICED THE TWO INTERIOR FLANKS OR SPOKES OF the wheel move in. Twitching with anticipation, he instructed his charioteer, ‘Keep moving ahead, no matter what. I’ll take care of the rest, just keep moving forward.’ He threw back a quick glance and saw Shikandin order his horseman to keep up. Dharma and the others trailed further behind.

By Hara, today they’ll all be proud of me, Abhimanyu promised himself. He thought of Uttara, of the gleam in her eyes as she gave him a warrior’s welcome. Filled with joyful energy at the prospect, Abhimanyu raised his bow and attacked. He shot alternately to his left and right with unbelievable speed. Both enemy flanks rippled with confusion and fear. It seemed the formation would be strained, possibly broken under his unrelenting onslaught. But Asvattama and Jayadrath rallied their men, and the flanks continued to squeeze in.

Abhimanyu engaged once again. He was now past the near edges of the enemy flanks, and fast approaching the central sections. As the sounds of a skirmish began to ring out behind him, he glanced back. The flanks on the rim had fallen on the last of Dharma’s men. Bhim and Dhrstyadymn were issuing frantic orders to hold the rear, and Dharma was already falling back. Shikandin, however, did not bother to look anywhere but ahead.

‘Puuya!’ Jayadrath swore out loud as Shikandin’s intentions became clear to all on the field. After a hushed conference with his lieutenants, the Sindhu King began to move his men diagonally, clustering his forces behind Abhimanyu’s advancing position rather than directly to the side.

Shikandin saw the offensive and called out to Abhimanyu to hold back, but the young warrior was now a man possessed. The thrill of battle was on

him; the sense of power at taking human life with impunity had made him unstoppable.

Spitting out a curse, Shikandin ordered the men with him to broaden their defensive formation while he moved up alongside Abhimanyu. Jayadrath had anticipated the attempt. ‘Now!’ he shouted and led the charge. A whirlwind force of men and horses rushed at Shikandin from the side. Shikandin tried to hold off the advancing front with a steady stream of arrows, and ordered his charioteer to pick up speed in an attempt to avoid crashing into the enemy.

But Jayadrath’s plan was more subtle than that. At the last moment, he swung aside, throwing his men into the gap between Shikandin and the others behind him. In the meantime, Asvattama, seeing what Jayadrath had in mind, concentrated his attack on Abhimanyu. As the gap between Abhimanyu and Shikandin increased, Jayadrath turned his men around, now forming a perfect circle around Shikandin. The Sindhu King himself stood squarely in Shikandin’s path.

Oblivious to the fact that Shikandin was no longer with him, Abhimanyu burst ahead like wildfire. He cheered as he saw the central or hub division ahead of him, Acharya Dron seated on an elephant at the centre of the formation. In a fit of feverish excitement, Abhimanyu aimed at the Acharya.

Dron swatted the single shaft aside with his sword, but was nevertheless impressed. He turned to Kripa and said, ‘Thank the gods this boy is one of a kind. If they had all been like him, this war would have been forfeit from the beginning. But,’ he added, ‘he is young and immature. The intoxication of battle is already upon him. He has allowed himself to be separated from the others: an act of stupidity rather than valour, but he is too young to know the difference.’ He looked up as Asvattama came riding towards them. A sign from his son told Dron that Dharma’s army had been thrown back and could not break through – Asvattama would not have left his position otherwise.

Dussasan snarled and urged Dron, ‘Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s get him…Acharya.’

Dron raised his bow and let fly a single, precise arrow. The shaft whizzed its way through the tumult to hit the wooden cross-pole on the underside of Abhimanyu's vehicle. The pole broke, causing the car to collapse. Abhimanyu's horses neighed with fear, as they were dragged to the ground by the change in momentum. His charioteer was flung into the air and landed on the ground with a hard thud, never to move again.

For a short while, Abhimanyu was baffled. He stood ankle-deep in the debris of his vehicle, his horses writhing on the ground. Shikandin and the others of his army were nowhere to be seen. He was alone.

A mocking cackle ran through the army around him. He let the rage of humiliation take over. Determined, Abhimanyu picked up his weapons and climbed out of the wreckage. He strode into the space between him and the huge division of men around him and placed his weapons on the ground, by his feet.

'Well?' Abhimanyu's voice rang out over Syoddhan's ranks. He smiled and said, taunting, 'I'm still alive. Does anyone dare face me?'

The challenge took the enemy by surprise, more for the courage it showed than the warrior's overconfidence. Glances of incredulity were exchanged, which Abhimanyu mistook for hesitation, but before he could act on his appraisal, a warrior not much older than himself dismounted from his vehicle. 'I, Lakshman, son of Syoddhan, accept your challenge,' the man declared. 'This is well met, cousin.'

Without a word, Abhimanyu let loose an arrow. Lakshman lost no time in returning the assault. Syoddhan's armies watched astonished as the two youngsters duelled. Lakshman was a well-trained warrior, indeed, one taught to value precision. Unlike Abhimanyu, he spent a few critical moments getting into a stance before releasing his arrow. Abhimanyu soon realized that those crucial moments were all that he needed. A heady rush filled him as he decided on a bold strategy. He fit an arrow to his bow in readiness, but did not let it loose. Lakshman continued to attack, while Abhimanyu moved around the field, baiting Lakshman and dodging his arrows, waiting for the right instant. Soon, Abhimanyu saw it – the

predictable rhythm Lakshman had settled into; the even pace at which he moved, waited, attacked and then moved again.

This time, Abhimanyu was ready. As soon as Lakshman let loose an arrow, Abhimanyu struck, letting fly a single, swift shaft. Before Lakshman could bring himself out of his rhythm to deal with this unexpected attack, steady himself and counter, Abhimanyu's arrow hit him, severing head from neck.

Bow still in hand, Lakshman's decapitated frame fell slowly to the ground. In the silence that followed, the only sound that could be heard was Abhimanyu's loud panting.

Syoddhan's cry cut through the air stunning them all, for no one had noticed his arrival. 'Kill him!' he shouted. 'All of you…kill him!'

Dron glared at Asvattama, who slid off his horse and approached Abhimanyu. Not hesitating for a moment, Abhimanyu let off a host of arrows in his adversary's direction. Asvattama, however, was not Lakshman. He twisted and spun, dodging Abhimanyu's arrows till, soon, Abhimanyu's quiver was empty. Asvattama smiled, mocking the younger warrior.

Returning the gesture in kind, Abhimanyu threw down his bow and drew his sword.

'Big mistake,' Asvattama muttered under his breath and came forward. This time, Abhimanyu was out of his element. He was good and had been taught well by Govinda, but his opponent was an exceptionally skilled swordsman. As Abhimanyu showed signs of tiring, Asvattama said, 'Didn't Govinda teach you the most important lesson, young man? Never, never, fight against Asvattama Bharadvaja with a sword.'

'He may have told me,' Abhimanyu grunted as he swung hard. 'But his own caution didn't stop him ever, did it?'

'For that stout heart, young man, I'll leave you with a lesson but nothing more,' Asvattama said. His sword moved faster than the eye could see, and soon Abhimanyu's blade lay on the ground. The young man himself had no injury from Asvattama's swordplay, except for a large bruise on his wrist where Asvattama had hit him with the flat of his blade.

‘Next time, then,’ Asvattama said, walking back to where Dron and the other commanders were clustered.

‘What was that?’ Vasusena demanded.

Asvattama did not reply, nor did he meet his father’s recriminating gaze.

Vasusena turned to Dron. ‘Is there no way to stop this boy before he makes a laughing stock of us? Let’s get him, all at once.’

‘Good idea!’ Dussasan agreed.

‘No…’ Asvattama began, with a look at Syoddhan, who clearly found Vasusena’s proposal just as distasteful he did. But lost in his grief, Syoddhan waited too long to speak his mind and by the time he had gathered his thoughts, it was too late.

Kripa was already preparing to lead the assault. He met Asvattama’s incredulous gaze with the explanation, ‘Don’t hesitate, Asvattama. If we don’t get rid of this boy, we can never call ourselves warriors again. Besides,’ he added, in a low voice, ‘what is to become of us if the world comes to know a half-trained youngster can break the most complex martial formation designed by the Firewrights? Forget this war, forget everything, think of the chaos and uprising we would have on our hands. The entire system relies on us to keep it stable; these kings rely on us to keep them safe. If we don’t kill Abhimanyu now, we lose the chance to prove our invincibility, and these same kings and soldiers who call us Acharya and bow to us will spit on our dead bodies. Don’t be a fool!’

‘You cannot…’

‘He’s right, Asvattama,’ Dron cut him short. He took a deep breath and then screamed out loud, ‘Charge! Charge! Bring me that boy’s head!’

Cackling with eagerness, Dussasan charged, Kripa and Vasusena flanking him.

Abhimanyu was taken aback by the unusual and unorthodox combined assault, but he soon regained his wits. A sword was of no use, he realized. He needed something that gave him more cover against multiple adversaries. Diving back into the debris of his chariot, he heaved with all his strength at a wheel that had partially come off from its axle. With a grunt of effort, he pulled. It gave just in time, as the first of Kripa’s arrows

whizzed at him. Raising the wheel, Abhimanyu used it as a shield. Quickly he set it upright on the ground and rolled it forward, moving under its cover. He came back to where he'd dropped his sword and picked it up again. A wild, blood-curdling cry slipped from him, as he threw himself into the fight.

He felt warm blood spray on his face and found pleasure in the knowledge that it was the enemy's. Men attacked him from all directions but he moved without thinking, maddened by a force he had neither experienced before, nor understood now. Abhimanyu laughed without knowing why, howled with delirious joy, and sought out his opponents with a feral hunger. He saw himself in their fear-widened eyes as they fell dead: a red demon, a blood-drenched god that none could withstand. With every corpse that fell he felt sated and thirsty at once. He could not take another step without treading on still-warm flesh or spilled entrails, but it was not enough.

Dussasan's son, Buhsasan, now joined the fray, as did Vasusena's son, Vrishasena. Asvattama remained where he was, but could no longer ignore his father. Dron came up behind him to rasp in his ear, 'Prove it,' he said, and went ahead to confront Abhimanyu. His eyes filled with pain, Asvattama followed.

Ahead, a spinning whirlwind and a storm of death. At its centre, Abhimanyu, fighting first with his sword and then, as the blade remained wedged in an enemy soldier's flesh, raising the wheel above his head with both arms, as though he wielded a giant discus. His shoulders taut under the wheel's weight, the veins of his neck bulging from the strain, Abhimanyu moved, now one with his weapon, across the field. Wherever he went, men fell dead, crumbling like clay, their skulls bashed in by the spinning wheel, torsos rent and limbs severed by sharp splinters of its wood.

Dron watched, stunned by the valour and skill of the young warrior, till a gut-churning cry of pain rent the air, followed by Vasusena's shout as his son, Vrishasena, fell dead, his legs severed at the knees, his eviscerated guts spilling into his own lap as he collapsed. The Acharya saw he no longer had

a choice. ‘Now, Kripa! Asvattama! Aim for the wheel, shatter it!’ he instructed.

Kripa let loose more than a dozen arrows, shattering the wheel into splinters. Abhimanyu let go of it just in time and threw himself behind the remains of his chariot-rig to escape the flying shards. His hand fell on a mace, or a part thereof. Picking it up, he faced his enemy yet again. The makeshift weapon felt light in his hand; he felt it would but fly away like a bird if he let it go. The strangeness of the moment brought him back to reality. He looked at the battlefield around him, at the death and destruction he had caused, and the mob that advanced upon him to have its vengeance. Slowly, the mace seemed to regain its natural bulk.

This is the end, Abhimanyu realized. *I will die here*. There would be no going back to camp, no hero’s welcome, no joking with Govinda and Partha. There would be no looking into Uttara’s loving eyes again or feeling her warmth close to him. At the thought of her, the dismay he felt disappeared. Abhimanyu gazed with longing as her lovely features played before his mind’s eye. He willed the image onto his every nerve and pore, committing it to a memory that he knew would not fade with death or whatever lay beyond. Then, he was ready. With a yell, he ran at the enemy, his mace upraised to strike.

‘Now! Aim for the boy! Kill him! Kill him!’ Dron commanded. Kripa immediately complied.

Asvattama hesitated, but as his father’s gaze turned on him he closed his eyes and let fly his arrows till he heard the order to stop. ‘By Agni and Varuna!’ he gasped as he opened his eyes and saw Abhimanyu.

The warrior was on his knees, his hands covered in his own blood, alive but barely so. Countless arrows had perforated his chest and arms, even his back, and two had gone into his left thigh. Blood and bile dribbled out of his mouth.

Vasusena started a great cheer, which the armies around them took up.

‘Wait!’ Buhsasan said, still gasping for breath. ‘He’s not dead, not yet.’ With a leer of anticipation, he came forward, dragging along a heavy mace.

With what life was left in him, Abhimanyu tried to reach for the weapon he had dropped, but he was too wounded to move swiftly. Buhsasan swung his mace, crushing Abhimanyu's arm. A cry of pain escaped Abhimanyu, at which Buhsasan laughed and kicked the prone warrior hard, sending him sprawling on his back and then followed with a blow to his chest, mangling armour into lacerated flesh.

Abhimanyu's eyes reeled back in their sockets. Pain wracked his entire body and intensified till it was a throbbing beyond bearing.

'Shall we make him squeal like a little girl?' Buhsasan asked the crowd, who urged him on. 'Or shall we strip him like a whore? I hear his *mother*, as he supposedly calls her, was quite the entertainer when my father took off her robe.'

The words seemed to bring Syoddhan back to reality. 'Finish it!' he ordered.

'But, Uncle…'

'I said, finish it! This is a war, not some pleasure joust in the palace gardens. Finish it and get back into ranks.' With that, Syoddhan strode away, his men moving aside in a hurry to let him through.

Buhsasan waited till he was sure his uncle was gone before turning back to Abhimanyu. 'Oh well,' he consoled himself, 'at least I get to do this.' He spat on Abhimanyu's face and kicked it yet again, enjoying the fact that the prone warrior was conscious enough to be aware of his own humiliation.

Lost in agony, Abhimanyu felt his eyes close and the world around him spun into darkness.

But Buhsasan was not done. He stamped down on Abhimanyu's thigh, driving the embedded arrows deeper into the flesh, grinding the sharp arrowheads in till the shards brutally severed nerve from muscle and bone. Abhimanyu screamed, and his eyes flew open.

It was what Buhsasan wanted. 'Look at me,' he challenged.

Despite his pain, Abhimanyu met his opponent's gaze without fear. Then he smiled, as he looked through the man and into the distance beyond, where Uttara's face had painted itself on a clear blue sky.

Buhsasan neither noticed, nor cared. He braced one foot on the raw, bloody flesh of Abhimanyu's chest and raised his mace high. 'This is for Vrishasena.' His feral cry cutting through the dust and heat of the battlefield, Buhsasan brought the mace down on Abhimanyu's head.

19

PARTHA'S MOST CHERISHED MEMORY WAS OF A SPRING AFTERNOON, many, many years ago, before the strife had started. Abhimanyu had been about five or six years old. That day, Partha had taken his son with him on a simple hunt of sorts, hoping to inculcate the sense of being a warrior in the boy from childhood. At first Partha had been patient, but he had gradually grown irate. Abhimanyu had shown no interest whatsoever in the act of hunting, his child-sized weapons, or the art of wielding them. He remained far too engrossed in the colours of spring, the scented air, and the swaying trees to pay any attention to his father's demonstration of how to track animals. When they did sight some small wildlife, Abhimanyu had asked if he might please get down from his pony and pet them.

Angry, Partha had pushed on, ignoring his son's wan face and the gentle suggestions from the attendants that children needed rest. When, finally, the sun became unbearable, as it sometimes did even in spring, they stopped for a meal. Partha had suggested a practice joust with wooden swords while they waited for the attendants to prepare them some food, but a forlorn Abhimanyu had refused. And Partha had lost his temper. He was not a man to shout as such but, this once, he did not hold back. Abhimanyu had listened, standing at respectful attention as an obedient son should, but he was just a child. Tears filled his large, soulful eyes, and streamed down his chubby cheeks.

Immediately, Partha had regretted his actions and attempted to console the boy. It had taken a while for him to assure his son that he was not displeased with him, and the beginnings of a tired and very sleepy smile appeared on the boy's face. He then sat down in the shade of a tree with

Abhimanyu's head on his lap, looking down at his son with love and a trace of disappointment as the boy slept. When Abhimanyu had woken up, Partha had tried one last time to explain the notion of hunting and how it was an exciting and honourable activity. He pointed out that the danger it posed to the hunter made it fair sport, that animals hunted each other for food and that death was, in any case, inevitable.

'It's all right for them to die, Abhimanyu. Everything that begins also ends. All who are born must die some day. You're a warrior, my son. There's no room for fear of death in your heart.'

Abhimanyu had thought hard, trying to make what sense a child could of such morbid and mundane things. 'So dying is just what comes after living? Like night comes after day?'

'Yes,' Partha had gushed, relieved.

But Abhimanyu had still not understood. He had asked, 'What's the point of dying if you haven't finished living?'

Partha had not answered then. Instead, he had diverted the conversation to other topics. In all these years neither had Abhimanyu asked him such a question again nor had he referred to that day's incident, but Partha had always treasured the memory of his dear son sleeping peacefully on his lap. And now Abhimanyu's tall, lean form lay limp on the ground, his head on Pradymna's knee. *What's the point of dying, Abhimanyu? You haven't even begun living yet.*

The young man's body was a mangled slime of pounded flesh and shreds of skin; his broken armour had been crushed right into his chest, past muscle and bone, causing what remained of his inner organs to spill out in a mix of metal shards. It was as though a demon from the netherworld had gorged on the young man's flesh and spit out the remains.

Partha looked around him, searching, as tears slowly blurred his vision. He needed Govinda, he needed his strength, his equanimity, the island of reason in the sea of despair that now surrounded them. His eyes fell on Panchali. Her face held pain, anger and an eerie, terrifying blankness. She did not weep, nor was she numbed with sorrow or shock. Panchali simply observed, her gaze constantly shifting from the lifeless Abhimanyu to the

inconsolable Subadra, the silent Dhaumya and then to the motionless Pradymna. Partha did not know whether it was the desire to escape his grief or the fury he felt at Panchali's composure, but he heard himself speaking in a voice that was not his own: 'I trusted you, Govinda. I trusted you and followed your every lead. Look where that has brought me…'

Govinda did not seem to hear or care; he remained kneeling beside Abhimanyu, unmoving. Eventually, he stirred, reaching for the piece of bloody linen that shrouded Abhimanyu's face, but Shikandin stopped him. 'No, Govinda. Not now.' He nodded towards the wailing Subadra.

'How?' Govinda asked.

'Dron formed the wheel.'

'And you sent *Abhimanyu* to break it?'

Shikandin hung his head in shame.

'We were right behind him, Govinda,' Dharma said. 'We had no intention of putting him in harm's way.'

'Then…how?'

'Jayadrath. Shikandin tried, but…'

Govinda looked at Shikandin for the first time since he had walked into the tent. Bloody and torn, Shikandin had yet to see to his own wounds or cast off his armour.

Partha, however, was not comforted by the explanation. His rage at the enemy, at his friends, at the whole world spilt forth in his words: 'I swear by the gods, by the honour of my forefathers, that monster Jayadrath shall die before the sun sets on tomorrow! Let those who live a thousand years hence remember the day of the eclipse as the day of ill portents. Let this be the black day when Partha had his vengeance! I swear by my son's immortal soul, if his killer lives at the end of tomorrow's battle I shall burn myself on his funeral pyre!'

An awed silence followed Partha's declaration. Bhim and the twins traded uncertain glances, not at their brother's oath but at the pride and moral satisfaction that flickered across Dharma's face.

Govinda turned to Partha, his eyes red, anger clear in the bulging veins on his forehead. 'You pathetic, miserable, fool!' he hissed.

Partha was stunned. He made to speak, but Govinda rose to his feet, his voice a raging growl, ‘How you can be so damned stupid? You self-obsessed, vain excuse of a man…you’ve just destroyed us all! All Dron has to do is keep Jayadrath alive tomorrow and victory is his!’

‘Yabha!’ Partha was shouting. ‘How can you? How can think of victory and defeat at a time like this, you selfish bastard?’

‘Because this boy died for your godforsaken victory, that’s why!’ Govinda’s voice thundered through the tent and beyond, stunning everyone who heard it. Then they all saw the anguish in his eyes.

At that, Partha’s strength failed and, falling to his knees, he buried his head in his hands and wept. One by one, everyone in the tent clustered around Govinda, wailing and bemoaning their loss. Subadra clutched at his leg as if she were drowning. Pradymna stood close by, silent and ashen-faced and, as the news spread through the camp, even the bravest and boldest of soldiers cried out in mourning. Govinda clenched his jaw and said nothing as their collective grief poured down on him, letting it wash over him without flinching. Panchali alone remained where she had been, as she had been. She did not cry.

Abhimanyu was not the only dead soldier from their army, but Govinda and the others had neither time nor men to spare to protect their numerous dead from scavengers or to see to their cremation, for a host of tasks remained: A count to be taken of the living and plans made for the next day’s battle. Those injured and dying had to be brought back to camp and made comfortable, while those with a chance of survival needed tending to by the medics. Neither Partha nor his brothers were in any position to discharge their daily responsibilities, and all arrangements, mundane and otherwise, fell to Shikandin, Govinda and Yuyudhana. Dhrstyadymn left, as usual, to check on the weapons and the men.

It was well past midnight and all was quiet by the time a tired, aching Govinda returned to where Abhimanyu lay. He found Uttara sitting alone by the dead warrior’s side. She was calm, her hand placed on Abhimanyu’s

chest as though he were asleep. Govinda felt an unbearable bolt of agony shoot through him. He longed to grieve, truly grieve for Uttara's sake.

A voice intruded on his dark thoughts. 'I'll take care of her,' Dhaumya said and went over to Uttara. He helped the young princess to her feet and proceeded to lead her away. Govinda's shoulders slumped and he felt sick to the stomach. Uttara, he realized, still did not believe that her husband was dead. He quailed to think what would happen when she emerged from her traumatised daze.

Finally, he was alone with his Abhimanyu. The boy he had loved as a son. As Panchali's son, as the future for which they had been willing to give up their happiness.

With a heavy heart, Govinda set about preparing for Abhimanyu's funeral. Somehow, he wrested off the hacked armour and picked the shards out of the mangled flesh underneath. He bandaged up the boy's crushed chest, swathing him with linen till nothing could be seen of the disfigured torso. Then he pulled away the cloth that covered Abhimanyu's face.

'Hai, Rudra!' The sight was enough to make him exclaim and turn away. The right side of Abhimanyu's face, his eye, his ear were gone. All that remained was a red mass of flesh and pieces of bone, with nothing more than a few clumps of matted, curly hair to suggest that this had once been a handsome human being. Govinda turned back, resolute, and continued his preparations. He bandaged Abhimanyu's head, covering it completely, and ran another piece of linen across his face. He then wiped the blood off Abhimanyu's neck and hands and sat back, fists clenched and chest heaving.

Just when Govinda thought he could take it no more, he felt a comforting touch on his back. Shikandin and Yuyudhana were there. Behind them, his eyes red from weeping but jaw set in a stern expression, was Yudhamanyu. He leant, for support, on an equally grim Uttamaujas. Working together, the five men carried Abhimanyu's limp form to the far corner of the campsite, where thousands of pyres had been lit over the past twelve days. A few still crackled on in an inappropriately merry blaze, while the rest were but piles of gray ash that marked the end of the end.

The five men moved slowly, readying Abhimanyu's bier log by log, each man piling wood on to the final form as though letting go of a memory or hope. Finally, they placed the dead warrior's body on the woodstack, but made no move to light it – that task would be Partha's after the next day's battle. Govinda muttered words of prayer the others could not catch and turned away. He stared at the blue-black sky, searching for solace in the stars. Yudhamanyu let out a moan as his loss hit him once again. In an unexpected show of emotion he turned to Shikandin, resting his forehead on his father's shoulder. Uttamaujas laid a consoling hand on his brother's back as Yuyudhana looked from one of his companions to the other, trying his best to remain strong for them all. At length, he called them gently to take the ritual plunge in the nearby river before heading back.

As the five men entered their camp, Pradymna and Dhrstyadymn came up to meet them, prompting Govinda to speak. 'Pradymna,' he instructed, 'bring me the rest of my weapons. I have only my sword.'

'You mean…?'

'Yes, I mean my astra-weapons. Don't pretend to be shocked; you've always known that I've owned many. Also, tell Daruka to be ready. I may need a charioteer of my own.'

'But…' Yuyudhana began.

'Jayadrath will die tomorrow. If Partha fails to kill him, I'll do it. I'll break my promise if I have to; dishonour is not new to me. I can't let Partha die… I owe him a great debt, one that I will willingly pay with my life, my honour, whatever is mine to give… If Partha hadn't spoken up that day, after the dice game, if he hadn't gone against Dharma's authority… I can't bear to imagine what could have happened to Panchali. For that I owe Partha my life and my soul.'

Yuyudhana swallowed hard and nodded while Shikandin grit his teeth at the memory of those bitter events. Dhrstyadymn opened his mouth to speak, but found he had nothing to say.

'Besides,' Govinda continued, 'without Partha, this war is lost anyway. Our men have long believed that he is invincible, that he alone can decimate the enemy. They fight because he fights. His despair this evening

has already weakened them as much as Abhimanyu's death has. They know Acharya Dron is a trained Firewright and over these two days he has proved himself a splendid Commander. Our armies already consider tomorrow's battle to be lost, and if we lose Partha as well they will surrender – Dharma first of all. Do you see him facing Dron, Asvattama, Syoddhan or Vasusena? Let's not forget Kritavarman fights for them too.'

Dhrstyadymn grabbed Govinda's hand. 'Let's finish this ourselves, Govinda. Damn these spineless Kurus and their farce of a war! Between you and Shikandin, you can kill off every rabid dog in that pack. If there's anyone left, Yudhamanyu, Uttamaujas, Pradymna and I can clean up. Let's do this, Govinda! For Abhimanyu! For Panchali!'

A sad smile crept on to Govinda's lips. Slowly, he shook his head to say no. He walked off, leaving the others staring after him, astonished.

'Why?' Yuyudhana asked.

Shikandin said what Govinda had not. 'Because, ultimately, each soldier here must fight this battle for one reason and one reason alone. And no one can tell you what your reason must be.'

20

A LITTLE BEFORE DAWN, PANCHALI WAITED IN FRONT OF THE empty command tent for everyone to assemble. She raised a questioning eyebrow as Pradymna, arrayed in his battle-mail and carrying a large bundle of weapons, walked by.

‘I…Father…he insists that if Partha doesn’t kill Jayadrath…’ Pradymna said. Panchali made to respond, but stopped as the others of their council began to arrive.

Dhrstyadymn was in conversation with Shikandin. ‘…confidence has never been so low,’ he was saying. ‘We are already down in numbers compared to Syoddhan’s armies, and I’ve heard talk, this morning, of surrender and defection…’

Dharma’s voice intruded, ‘That would not be defection, it would be desertion! Such talk, such thought, is treason. It is a crime, one punishable by death!’ Partha said nothing but Bhim and the twins nodded in agreement. ‘Even Syoddhan wouldn’t stoop to admit traitors into his ranks…’ Dharma finished.

‘Would you admit men who claimed they had realized Syoddhan was unrighteous or unjust, or soldiers who claimed to have been coerced or misled into fighting for him, into your ranks, Dharma?’ Shikandin asked.

‘That’s different!’

‘How convenient…’ Dhrstyadymn mumbled.

The loud trill of a war-horn called for the army to muster for the day’s battle, just as Dhaumya joined them, along with Subadra and a red-eyed Uttara. She had, Dhaumya had told them, come forward to lead her men as she always did, but just looking at her sword had made her relapse into

tears. That Uttara, the woman whose courage had not failed when her brothers and fellow citizens had died in front of her, could lose heart was a blow to them all.

Together, they watched as the soldiers fell grudgingly into their ranks, their discontent and fear palpable. Sergeants walked up and down the lines, trying to control the muttered exchanges, the general sense of indiscipline that the men showed, but their will too was visibly lacking and their efforts seemed feeble. Yuyudhana and Yudhamanyu were overseeing the muster, riding up and down the various lines. Finally, they came over to report to Dharma and Dhrstyadymn.

‘We have a problem,’ Yuyudhana said. ‘I’m not sure we can get the men on to the field in formation, leave alone make them fight…’

‘I was sitting around the campfires last night, talking to some of them,’ Yudhamanyu supplemented, ‘They don’t think we can do it… Not against Wright-magic…’

‘What!’ Dharma exclaimed.

‘The truth is, they don’t trust us, their leaders, anymore…’

‘What nonsense is this?’ Dharma shouted and then softened down as he noticed Partha flinch. Still angry, he hissed, ‘What is this talk of trusting and believing? Who dared speak such cowardly words? I want those soldiers executed here and now.’

‘Come now, Dharma! Our men are afraid, that is all,’ Yuyudhana tried to pacify him, while Yudhamanyu drew Dhrstyadymn aside.

‘Uncle,’ Yudhamanyu began, ‘I mean it. Their faith in our ability to lead them is shattered. After what happened to Abhimanyu, each man thinks death and defeat are inevitable… If a warrior like Abhimanyu, one we all would have given our lives to protect, was not safe, then…’

Dhrstyadymn cursed under his breath.

In the meantime, Yuyudhana and Dharma had started to argue, and other tempers too were beginning to flare. ‘We don’t need cowards in this army…’ Dharma shouted.

‘Nor do we need fools and idiots for our leaders!’ Yuyudhana replied.

‘Say that to the ghost-woman, or eunuch, or whatever the Grandsire said he is, will you? He was right behind Abhimanyu. Why didn’t he protect the boy, if he was powerful enough to kill the Grandsire and all?’ Sadev snapped.

Shikandin was taken aback by the accusation, but said nothing. He simply turned away.

To everyone’s wonder, Subadra came to his defence, her voice trembling as she pointed out, ‘He wasn’t the one who goaded Abhimanyu into such a foolhardy venture. He wasn’t the one, driven by vanity and power to push for a head-on attack to break the Acharya’s formation when a thousand other ploys would have sufficed to defend us, buy us time till Govinda could be sent for!’

‘*Vathu*, daughter! What do you know of warfare?’ Dharma chastised her.

‘Apparently more than you do, Your Highness! And with good cause! When my turn comes to die in this war, it will not be on the battlefield with battered armour, honour and dignity; it shall be here, on the bloodless sand, naked, being fed on alive, my screams unheard by the valourous dead!’ The words flew out of her, the years of her submissive silence as the wife of a Kuru prince driving her to blatant disobedience. But it lasted for an instant. She looked down and began weeping.

An enraged Dharma swore under his breath and made to speak, but stopped as Panchali laid a hand on his arm. With a sigh, he let go of the matter. ‘Come now, Subadra, friends, brothers,’ he said. ‘Abhimanyu was a son to us all, and we each mourn him in our own way. These are difficult times, and we long to blame someone for our loss. But, the truth is, this was destiny. Who can change what the gods have written? Abhimanyu died a warrior’s death. He died with honour and shall rest in the heavens of the ancestors, a hero among them all. For so was his destiny, such was his Fate. It is these very things that we fight to protect!’

‘Try explaining that to our soldiers …’ Yudhamanyu commented under his breath.

Dhrstyadymn added, ‘The men will need more than that, Dharma. Let us use astra weapons. We only need counter the enemy, not attack them…’

‘No. Once and for all, no. No astra weapons. That is an order.’

‘You invite mutiny, Dharma. The soldiers need more than your orders. They need to know they die for something beyond your whims…they need more than some nebulous concept of destiny and Divine Order, the notion that the Emperor is Lord of their lives because that is how the world is… Indeed, they gather here to challenge that very notion. How then can we explain to them that it happened because it was destined to happen? That we can neither protect, nor give them victory, because we won’t use astra weapons, and they have no choice but to die for us, because they are bound by duty and destiny to do so? That simply won’t do! They need you to lead them, to give them more…’

Dharma stared at him, shocked. ‘What do you want me to do? Go out there and beg them to fight for me?’

‘Dharma…’

‘It’s not me they fight for! It is not my ambition! I lead this war because I am Emperor, but not for my personal gain. It is their duty to fight for me!’

‘Dharma, please. Listen to yourself. You say they are destined to fail, but bound by duty to die for you. How is that fair?’ Dhaumya pleaded.

Dharma was incredulous. ‘But that is the point! It’s not me, Dharma the man, they fight for! They fight, because they’re bound by duty and honour. I am Dharma Yudhisthir, the righteous, and true Emperor of Aryavarta. My destiny has brought me to this moment, as theirs has brought them to it. That is all!’

Panchali glared, unimpressed, at Dharma. Then she turned on her heel and began to walk to the head of the convoy, where Partha’s units waited to lead the march. She thought she heard Dharma call her name, but she did not turn, she did not glance back. Solemn and determined, she climbed onto Partha’s chariot, intending to use the elevation to address the entire army.

The soldiers began murmuring, anxious and curious at her sudden appearance. Panchali opened her mouth to speak but suddenly realized she had no words. She stared into the crowd; she saw their faces – men who

were fathers and sons, brothers and husbands, lovers, friends… simply men, and yes, a few women, too, in the Matsya ranks. She could not speak. If anything, she longed to tell them to leave, to walk away; she longed to say that this was not their battle. They were bound by nothing, not their sense of servitude, not the moral burden of duty, and certainly not a false sense of honour that condemned them to die for another's pride. She felt crushed. She had betrayed the thousands who had fought and died for them. She had betrayed Abhimanyu, the boy she loved as her own. She longed to cry for him, but the tears had not come. All night she had tried to weep, but had failed. The anguish was unbearable.

Panchali remembered the times she had teetered on the brink of a dark abyss: The day of the dice game, the day Jayadrath had assaulted her, and the many days and endless nights since. She had survived all that, but now she felt as though every trasenu atom of strength had been drained out of her, that she could no longer fight the void of hopelessness that seemed to be sucking her in. She felt the darkness rise out of the abyss, tendrils that snaked towards her and wrapped themselves around her waist, her ankles, the black bonds searing her skin the way Dussasan's gaze once had, burning her flesh as Suratha's touch once had, leaving her as nothing but a cadaver without so much as the shadow of a soul. The dark bonds pulled, her knees buckled. She was going to fall.

21

IN ANOTHER PLACE, AT ANOTHER TIME, PANCHALI WOULD HAVE laughed.

But now, she could not. As always, he had come up on her from behind, silent as a prowling tiger. The touch on her elbow was light but reassuring. Her eyes went numb with pain and then clouded with confusion as she turned to him. Silently, she asked him the same question that she knew haunted them all.

For what?

He gave her a reassuring glance and helped her off the chariot.

She backed away, looking at him all the time.

Blazing with determination, Govinda turned to face the assembled men. Every eye was on him as he stepped forth with neither weapon nor armour, nor crown on his head. His chest was bare, for his upper robe was tied around his waist as befitted a man who served, not led, and his hands were empty.

'I am Govinda…'

His voice rang loud over the assembled armies. 'You know me as Govinda Shauri but that is not who I always was. Once, I was simply Govinda…not an honoured soldier like you, but a common cowherd. Then how is it that I stand here today; here, before you, on this sacred battlefield? Some claim that it is divine intervention, others call it destiny…' He continued, scornful, 'Destiny…Hah! My son is dead. Abhimanyu – truly, he was as a son to me… And I couldn't save him, not while he lived nor once he died. Those who console me tell me that it was inevitable, that it was his destiny, just as it was yours to leave behind your homes, your families and children to come here, to fight, to die. I cannot begin to imagine how

frightened you must have been. I was frightened, too, once, when so-called destiny came knocking at my door. I know how you felt when these kings gave you the weapons you hold and told you that you were duty-bound to fight, because it was destined for you to do so. Destiny!

‘But is that all we are? Toys in the hands of kings and gods? What of your strength, the true strength of Aryavarta? The gods bless us with rain, yes, but they don’t till the earth with their sweat. It is you who do that. The kings, they tell us that they rule us with wisdom and benevolence, but it is by our blood…*your* blood and might that their realms are defended, kept verdant and prosperous. And you worship these gods and fear the kings and seers, but why can’t you see yourself for what you are? Why do you bow and bend in reverence, respect and fear?

‘I don’t cry for the son I’ve lost, nor do I ask you to cry for all that you’ve suffered. But that does not make me helpless; it does not stop me from doing what I must. And so I say to you now: Time and again, in every age, a Govinda will be born to set right the scales of life. The oppressors shall be destroyed, and the innocent shall rule. Because that is who we are: the self-perfecting Eternal Universe. I was born Govinda, but it is the force of humanity that has made me Govinda Shauri!’

His voice seemed to flood the entire camp, reverberate off the earth and fill the sky as he went on. ‘This may not have been your battle. This may not have been my battle. But it is now. Not because my son is dead, but because his death was wrong. Not because Panchali is our Empress, but because what happened with her was wrong. Several such wrongs have led us to this moment. I am no king, nor am I a wise seer. But I can tell just from unjust. I am not here because I am some emperor’s soldier or slave. I can feel and think and ask why things must be so; I love and cherish, just as you do, because we are human, and that is how we are. It does not take destiny to know love, to show the compassion that has brought us here. Our strength is ours to wield; to do with as we choose, even if that choice is to let it ebb from us or to surrender it in the service of others. And so I ask you to choose, and to fight for what *you* think is right.’

Breathing hard, Govinda paused and looked around him. He knew how each soldier, each warrior, felt – confused, uncertain, yet strangely uplifted. He knew that feeling well.

It was hope.

It brought tears to his eyes and he felt his heart brim over with immeasurable affection, a love like no other for all that existed. *What amazing creatures we are, to carry this very essence of existence within us. Hope – the undefined potential of all creation, the power of the Creator itself.* For all his efforts at composure, Govinda felt himself shaking. He clenched his jaws, and his nostrils flared with emotion as he merged heart and mind into one. He closed his eyes, letting the thoughts rush at him, as he knew they would.

Nothingness.
Dark, like the core of the earth.
The dark nothingness inside an atom.
The single dot on the side of a die.
The endless circle of time.
Kali.

In a hoarse, but compelling voice, he continued, ‘Do you feel afraid? Do you feel weak and helpless? I do not know whether it frightens you that when death came to Abhimanyu it was not by means of an astra weapon but simply the hatred and anger that human beings are capable of. And that is why it is so easy to see that it was wrong.

‘But then, you think: who are we to decide such great matters. You raise your eyes to the heavens, asking for answers, begging for mercy. But you won’t find the answers there. Look down instead. Look here, on this earth, for the answers you seek are inside your own soul. The next time you curse your fate and you speak of destiny, remember my words. Remember me. Remember Govinda. Remember the Govinda within each one of you, the spark of divinity that is not the small voice of one man, but the collective soul of all creation. Remember that you are a part of Govinda, of the very

purpose of the Eternal Universe. I am Duty, I am Destiny! I am the Everlasting Being that shines within each one of you! I am a free man. And I will fight!'

As one, the army broke into a great cheer. Men shouted, rang their war-horns and blew their conches, shouting with joy in their newfound courage and hope. Some laughed, some cried, and some embraced each other as a solemn peace took their hearts.

Dharma and the others gathered in front of the Command Tent were equally moved. Dhrstyadymn and Bhim openly, proudly, wiped at their eyes. Emotions brimmed over in each heart, nameless feelings of joy and fullness so pure that it was sorrow. Wordless smiles and impulsive embraces were exchanged till finally they settled down to soft, quiet chuckles as though they had all laughed loud and long.

Partha alone remained still. He held his bow upright in front of him, its tip resting on the ground. Both hands were wrapped tight around it, head bent as if in deep thought. His brothers patted him on the back and squeezed his shoulder, but he did not move. Panchali smiled at the sight, knowing well what Partha saw in the solitude of his mind, what he had been journeying towards since the day of the dice game. The day he had broken every sacred rule of duty and obedience and spoken in defiance of Dharma's authority. The day he had nearly cast down his weapons. Now, he had seen what it was that Govinda had spoken of. He had found the Universe within. The way she once had.

Slowly, the chanting began. One name rang from every tongue, in adoration, in prayer, as a war-cry. To say it was to feel courage and to find hope.

Govinda.

Dhrstyadymn lost no time in making the most of Govinda's efforts. He directed Bhim and Sadev to lead the roused armies out of camp and onto the battlefield, making sure that each of the division commanders knew to keep the soldiers' spirits up. It took some time, but eventually the camp emptied out. Govinda was one of the last people to make for the gateway, a

silent and preoccupied Partha with him. The two men paused as they saw Panchali.

‘That was some speech…’ she declared, without prelude. Her voice was still strained, and Govinda could tell she had not let herself feel the pain or cry for Abhimanyu. But now was not the time.

‘You have no idea,’ he said. ‘I seem to be making far too many speeches these days. At this rate, people won’t believe I’m much of a warrior.’

‘What now, Govinda?’

‘The men will fight. That should upset Syoddhan’s plans for a while. In the meantime, I’ll try and find a way to Jayadrath. The scouts report that Dron has his armies in the needle formation. He’s stacked his divisions one behind the other. It’s typically an offensive formation, but he’s used it well as a defensive one. We’ll have to get through the whole of Syoddhan’s army to catch a glimpse of Jayadrath…’

‘Sometimes,’ Panchali said, ‘we remain so obsessed with the enemy that we forget who we are…’

‘What do you mean, Panchali?’ Govinda asked, frowning.

‘We go on and on about astra weapons, and assume that the enemy is more powerful for possessing them. But as you said, death came to Abhimanyu through the hatred and anger of men. Remember your strength, Govinda. Remember who you are.’

‘And who am I, Panchali?’

‘The fastest horseman in all Aryavarta…and your friend Partha here is a man who can shoot in the dark.’

22

VASUSENA CONSIDERED THE BATTLEFIELD, OBVIOUSLY PUZZLED. ‘I don’t understand. What could he have said that would get their soldiers to fight on? They were as good as finished, especially after that fool Partha made his proclamation or vow…whatever it was. Hah! Our soldiers are still laughing at it! But Dharma’s men…? There’s a fire in their eyes and I just can’t understand what could have roused that in them!’

‘I’ve told you, don’t underestimate Govinda Shauri!’ Dron said.

‘He could convince you to slit your own throat, given the chance,’ Kritavarman growled. ‘We all followed him from Mathura, like a bunch of fools, remember? The manipulative cowherd!’

‘Yes, but he didn’t hack down a lone warrior,’ Syoddhan said.

Kritavarman simply shot back, ‘We were just following orders, Your Highness. Indeed, your brother was the one who led the charge!’

Syoddhan let it go, something he would not have done easily in the past. But much had changed. There were larger things in the world to worry about than loose words and childish barbs. Honour had to be more than just these meaningless epithets. Honour had to arise from within one’s own self. His own son had died the previous day. Lakshman had single-handedly faced Abhimanyu and died with honour. The pride made it a little easier to take the pain. *He’d so looked forward to the eclipse today*, Syoddhan brooded. The event of a lifetime, Lakshman had called it. A life that was too short…for Lakshman and Abhimanyu, both.

Pain blazed like a sharp blade through his heart, and Syoddhan instinctively raised his hand to his chest. His fingers touched intricately-wrought metal. With reluctance and regret, Syoddhan looked down at

himself. He was covered in armour unlike any he had seen before, not even on Dron or Asvattama. His earlier trappings, too, had been made of Wright-metal, but where that was a legacy from the days of yore, what he now had on was…indescribable. Fashioned from more pieces than could be counted, the armour felt as flexible and light as a tunic, but was as impenetrable as stone.

'Why, Acharya?' Syoddhan had been surprised when Dron had given him the armour that morning. 'You should be wearing this…'

'It was never mine to wear, Syoddhan,' Dron had said. 'This was made years ago by my ancestors. It was made at the pinnacle of their power, in fires that cannot be rekindled now.' Syoddhan had then glanced at Asvattama, expecting to see envy there. But all he saw was warm approval. Oblivious to their silent interaction Dron had then said, 'All hopes rest on your victory, Syoddhan. This is now yours. And I do not exaggerate when I say that this armour is impenetrable. Nothing, not even the best of Wright-metal can cut through it.'

Dron's words had, for a moment, spurred in Syoddhan an anger he knew to be irrational. He had wanted to shout at the Acharya, ask him why he had not offered the armour earlier; this magnificent impenetrable armour, which could have kept Lakshman alive. But he knew deep in his heart that nothing could have kept his son alive. *This was war*.

Syoddhan turned his thoughts back to the present. 'It still isn't over,' Dron was saying. 'The needle is a very strong defensive formation. It will serve our purposes today. Keep Jayadrath alive. As for Govinda Shauri – I don't think this newfound courage we see in Dharma's men could have been of his doing. It is quite obvious that Govinda's heart is not in battle. Either he was the hardest hit by Abhimanyu's death, or he knows failure is imminent. Partha may or may not kill himself, as promised, but I have no doubt that Dharma will surrender this evening. Why, there's no way their soldiers will fight on. Even their commanders, allies and kinsmen will piss on their pride. Listen to me, all of you. There's only one thing that needs to be done today. Jayadrath must be protected from harm. This is our chance. Dharma's army is like a dying lamp – one last defiant flare and then nothing

but smoke. We have hit Govinda where it hurts him the most. He cannot fight back. Jayeti! Victory!'

It did not take long for the whole battlefield to see for themselves what Dron had astutely identified at the start of the day. There was no doubt at all that Govinda had lost his will to fight.

Partha shouted and cajoled, trying to rally his friend. 'What's wrong with you, Govinda? After all the things you said… We've been fighting since morning and don't appear to be getting anywhere!'

But Govinda sounded detached. 'And where is it you want to go, Partha? Do you know where Jayadrath is?'

'Isn't it obvious? Jayadrath must in the most impenetrable of places in the formation – the needle's end.'

'Which, Partha, is exactly what Syoddhan wants you to believe…' Govinda said, grunting a little as he made his horses dodge some arrows. 'The safest place is not the one that is defended well, it is the place your enemy will never look.'

'And where is that?'

'Right behind you. The more we face resistance as we try to move ahead, the more convinced I am that Jayadrath is behind us, perhaps within our own army lines.'

'Then what are you waiting for, Govinda? Take us there…'

'You're searching for one man in an army of thousands, Partha. It's easy for him to hide, and difficult for us to find him.'

'What would you have me do then?' Partha demanded, scathing. 'Admit defeat?'

Irritated, Govinda snapped back, 'I'd have you shut up and wait! Patience is certainly not your strength, I know, but try and find some. Wait!'

Partha said nothing, but sulked as he continued to fight.

The day went on, the men became more weary, and Govinda continued to maintain his stubborn recalcitrance. Above them, the sun raced across the sky, its effulgence ebbing as the pale white shadow of the moon gained

strength. A purple dusk, like an overcast sky, slowly drew over them. Balahak whinnied and snorted.

Govinda indulged himself in a cold smile. ‘It’s time…’ With a sudden fervour, so unlike the lifeless man he had been all morning, he acted. He quickly dismounted and began undoing the straps yoking his horses to the horizontal wooden beam or cross-pole, that linked the steeds together and to the rig itself.

Partha watched, perplexed. The cross-pole mechanism was essential to keep the chariot balanced and the reins untangled, and it ensured that the horses kept their positions. Few deaths were worse than being dragged along for leagues by a horse gone wild, or else one terrified by an unbalanced rig. And here, there were four such creatures, magnificent no doubt, but also with minds of their own. Soon, his concern overcame his trust and he shouted, ‘What in Indra’s name are you doing, Govinda?’

Govinda said nothing, but threw a grateful smile at Pradymna, who jumped off his vehicle and came to help. The younger man appeared to know exactly what Govinda had in mind and the two worked together without a word. They removed the rest of the elaborate mechanism tethering horses and rig together and cast it aside.

‘Armour…’ Govinda instructed.

Pradymna immediately began undoing the protective metal coverings lashed over the horses’ vital organs.

Meanwhile, Govinda ran long lines of twisted leather and rope directly from each horse’s harness straps to metal rings set low on either side of the rig. The heavy harnesses formed a pile on the ground, alongside the cross-pole, the carriage shaft and the horses’ armour.

Then, Govinda did the unthinkable. He took the bridles off from each stallion’s hind legs. Now, there was absolutely no way to slow the horses down or control their actions, other than the often-ineffective reins that did nothing more than guide the horse by pressing gently on its strong chest.

‘I don’t suppose you intend for your horses to ever stop?’ Yuyudhana commented, drawing up nearby. He was still bleeding from a wound he had received earlier from a duel with Bhurisravas, their Yadu kinsman. It was a

battle that would have gone badly for Yuyudhana, but for Partha’s timely intervention.

Govinda looked up from the horses on hearing Yuyudhana’s voice. ‘Not till Jayadrath’s dead!’ he replied. With that, he jumped back on to his perch and picked up the reins, two in each hand. He was just in time.

23

A GREAT DIN FILLED THE AIR AS BIRDS AND INSECTS CRIED OUT in unnatural unison. The loud cackles and shrill chirps sounded like some hellish fiend screaming in a hateful tongue. Creatures of day fled alongside creatures of night in an impossible bid to escape what was about to happen. Slowly, an angry darkness crept over the sky, sucking in all light on earth, till every bit of it retreated into the huge blood-red orb that was the sun.

Suddenly, all was quiet. Fighting had stopped; the birds and insects had ceased their perpetual murmurs. The sound of horses' hooves seemed muted, elephants ceased to trumpet and the omnipresent clang of metal on metal that was the sound of battle had faded, leaving an unnatural silence that felt far more ominous than any war imaginable. As a collective gasp rose from the battlefield, Partha looked up and added his own sharp cry as he saw what the others had.

The sun was no longer whole.

'By Hara, Govinda, do you see this? I've heard about it but… but… Rudra save us, no wonder so many were willing to believe that this is some sort of magic!'

'It is as much magic as Firewright science,' Govinda grunted in response before making the horses rear and set off at a tremendous speed. Partha hung on, stunned by the reckless haste, clutching on to the sides of the car with one hand, his other arm wrapped around as many weapons as he could find. He wondered if anyone other than Govinda could have kept the unhinged rig from overturning at such speed.

'Govinda! What…?'

‘Eyes on the field Partha!’ Govinda warned. ‘We need to find him quickly. If Syoddhan’s forces realize what we are doing then we don’t have a chance.’

‘What are we…’

‘Come now, Partha Savyasachin. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten how to shoot in the dark?’

Partha chuckled as he remembered Panchali’s words. *The fastest horseman in all Aryavarta, and the marksman who could shoot in the dark.*… Finally, he understood. All morning, Govinda had knowingly moved further and further away from Jayadrath. Now, using the cover of darkness, he meant to circle around the battlefield to the area behind them. Syoddhan and Dron would expect them to continue to move forward as they had been doing all day. They would never imagine that Govinda was capable of the swiftness required to reach Jayadrath. And, in the darkness that was quickly enveloping the earth, they would not see that Govinda was doing exactly that. It was perfect timing. The perfect decoy.

The last dregs of light disappeared from the earth, leaving behind a blinding, complete darkness, thicker and different from the blue of night. A sense of unease settled over the battlefield, but Partha welcomed the loss of visibility as he would a familiar friend. The solitude it brought was a balm for his pain, and more. Partha chided himself. He should have known better than to doubt his friend. He thought to apologize, but there was no time for speech. He closed his eyes and reopened them every now and then, adjusting his vision to the increasing darkness. He thought he could make out the shadowy outlines of their own armies on his left, but was not sure. If Govinda was right, Jayadrath was hiding amidst that huge sea of men and animals.

Steadying himself, the archer stood up, gazing into the mask of shadows. His eyes squinted against the wind and a hand rested eagerly on his bow. Without warning, Govinda swerved into the armies on their left. Partha felt a sense of danger grow on him as a ripple of noise stirred among the armies around them. These, he realized, were not their soldiers but Syoddhan’s. Govinda was guiding the horses into the thick of the action.

Straining his ears, Partha heard Syoddhan's voice in the distance, and again felt their horses change direction. Govinda, he realized, was not just following the voices; he was listening to the orders that the two men called out to their armies. From their instructions, it was clear that Jayadrath was retreating further still, while Syoddhan gathered the rest of his forces into an impenetrable barricade. It was a well-thought-out move, Partha marvelled, and showed great wisdom: Syoddhan had resisted the temptation to rely simply on the strength of his larger force.

Dharma would have done exactly that, Partha seethed. He would have given in to his 'sense of duty', which was nothing more than misplaced ambition, just as he had done when he sent Abhimanyu in to break the wheel. For a moment, Partha felt his concentration waver as the pain of his loss turned into anger – against Dharma, against all that Dharma stood for, including the very order of things that had brought them to this war. Then, forcing himself to focus on the task at hand, he fitted an arrow to his bowstring.

Before he could give in to the impulse, a soft whisper sounded in his ear, 'Wait!'

Partha complied. Govinda slowed the stallions down to a trot, uncaring of the tumult that surrounded them, and kept still, as though listening intently. At length, Balahak gave a soft whinny. Govinda clucked his tongue, exchanging words with his horse in a language unique to the two. He turned to Partha. 'The wind is changing. There is a new smell in the air… Any time now. Close your eyes. Be ready.'

'But…'

'Do it! We have just one chance, my friend. Once the eclipse breaks, it won't take them long to know that we are here. Now, close your eyes!'

Partha obeyed, just in time.

Around him, thousands cried out in fear and awe as a dazzling beam of light shot through the dark sky, like Indra's own thunderbolt.

Behind closed eyelids, Partha could sense the jewel-like flash in the sky. He longed to open his eyes, to gaze upon this wonderous sight even if it meant he would not see another thing again for as long as he lived. He

dismissed the thought with long-inculcated discipline. *I am an archer. I am one with my arrow. It does not matter who colours the sky I fly in*.

He thought of what it was to shoot in the dark, to find meaning in the blackness just as others found meaning in colour and shape. *Look inwards. Then you will see that darkness and light are the same*. Partha drew in a deep, controlled breath and centred himself, honing his being into an instrument of action.

‘Now!’ Govinda called out.

Partha opened his eyes to find the sky infused with a silver glow, the first suggestion of the reappearance of light. Around them men stared at the sun, at the thin crescent of brilliance that emerged from the clutches of a dark moon. But Partha’s eyes sought and saw one target and one alone. Jayadrath.

‘I see him. Go. Straight ahead, go!’ he commanded Govinda, who complied with a flick of the reins that urged their horses ahead.

Shaibya reared and neighed, rallying his equine brethren into a charge, trading stealth for speed as the darkness began to fade. Partha did not care. He knew nothing could stop them now.

A shout went up from the enemy’s men. Syoddhan yelled orders with a fury. He moved to place himself squarely in Partha’s way. With a snarl of expectation, Partha aimed an arrow at Syoddhan’s heart, and then two more. All three shafts broke against the golden-white armour and fell, harmless, to the ground.

‘How…?’ Partha was stunned.

‘By Agni, he’s had the armour all along!’ Govinda exclaimed.

‘What?’ Partha was visibly confused.

‘Dron,’ Govinda explained. ‘He must have given Syoddhan this armour. It is supposed to be near-impenetrable, for it was made at the very beginning by the first of those who worked Wright-metal. If only we knew the secret of how it was wrought to such flexibility… What I would give to get a chance to see it up close, to see how it has been crafted to work…’

‘You can pry it off Syoddhan’s body once he’s dead,’ Partha declared, as he let off another flurry of arrows at the enemy. This time he aimed wide,

trying to find some weak point in Syoddhan's armour that he could get through. He followed up with a shaft to Syoddhan's face, but all the other man did was to turn and let the arrow break on the side of his helmet, before raising his own bow to retaliate.

'His horses,' Govinda said, his voice strained. 'Get his horses.'

Partha hesitated, knowing well how difficult it would have been for Govinda to contemplate such advice. But there was no choice. He did not argue, nor did he comment when Govinda looked away. Three more well-aimed arrows and the task was done. Govinda winced as a screeching neigh filled the air, the terrified voice of a horse in the throes of death. Swearing under his breath, Partha sent another arrow in the direction of the fallen steed, putting an end to the animal's misery.

For a while Syoddhan remained on his rig, trying to use the elevation to counter Partha's renewed attack, but the grounded vehicle was more of a risk than an advantage. He leapt off the rig, preparing himself for the worst.

'For Dharma,' Partha said, and raised his bow. He drew back the string, his fingers caressing the feathered tail of a sharp arrow, relishing what he believed would be the final moment of the war. He heard the twang of a bow, but started as he felt the sharp whip-sting of his string against his cheek and saw his arrow fall at his own feet. It took him a short while to realize that the bowstring had not snapped of its own accord; rather, it had been cut with immaculate precision.

A banner with the sign of a lion's tail streamed in the wind, filling Syoddhan with relief, even as it informed Govinda and Partha of the arrival of a new attacker.

'Not again!' Govinda muttered as he turned their horses to face Asvattama. He need not have feared, at least not for his horses, for Asvattama was no less adept at finding his mark in the dark, and his target was clear. His next shaft sped straight at Govinda. Govinda dodged quickly, but the arrow still buried itself in his arm. He grit his teeth against the pain and held on to the reins, an effort that caused the wound to bleed profusely.

'Govinda!' Partha cried out. Turning his concern to rage, he quickly fixed a new string on to his bow and met Asvattama's attack.

‘No!’ Govinda shouted. ‘Ignore him! Ignore him, Partha!’

For a moment, Partha did not understand. Then he turned his attention again to Syoddhan and realized that the other man was shouting out orders, yelling for Jayadrath to retreat.

Jayadrath!

He knew he did not have much time. Not only did Asvattama press his attack, but Partha could also sense the darkness around them thinning rapidly as the eclipse neared its end. As visibility returned, so would the enemy’s confidence. His advantage would be lost, and they would merely be a warrior and his horseman caught in the thick of enemy lines, hopelessly outnumbered.

‘Go on, Partha,’ Govinda said, this time without any trace of urgency.

Partha closed his eyes, focussing his mind on every sound around him: Syoddhan’s words that indicated that Jayadrath was moving to Asvattama’s assistance, the cadence of his horses’ hooves, and finally, the sound of Jayadrath’s voice answering Syoddhan. It was all he needed. Frowning in concentration, he fitted a wide, crescent-headed arrow to his bow. He pulled back the string and let the shaft fly. The arrow flashed high in the lightening sky, the silver-white metal striated with the reflection of the half-hidden sun and its shadow- moon before looping back down towards the earth and speeding past where he and Govinda were, barely an arm’s length away from them.

Govinda did not wait to see what happened next; he did not have to. Partha had never missed a target, and the splatter of warm blood Govinda felt on his cheek was just a solemn assurance. He heard the screams, the cries of woe as Syoddhan and the other commanders realized that the crescent-shaped arrowhead now bore a precious burden: Jayadrath’s severed head.

Before any of the commanders could think to mount a counterattack or resist their departure, Govinda began turning the horses around and urged them into a gallop. He and Partha were now weaving through the enemy’s men, the foot-soldiers clustered, aimless, too stunned at Jayadrath’s fall to offer resistance despite the quick return of the sun. Only when he saw

Yuyudhana and Bhim and heard their jubilant voices shouting praise, did Govinda allow some slack on the reins.

They rode towards their camp loudly cheered on by their army, but Govinda did not stop till they were all the way in. He jumped off the rig, leaving the horses to a waiting Pradymna, and strode through the camp, oblivious to the celebration and conversation around him, searching. He found Panchali sitting quietly inside Abhimanyu’s tent, watching over Uttara as she slept, withered and curled up, on Abhimanyu’s bed.

Panchali looked up as Govinda entered. She took in his blood-splattered face, his dirt and sweat-stained body, his chafed, bleeding palms and the arrowhead still lodged in his arm, and then turned away. Govinda left the tent without a word. He knew Panchali needed a few moments alone to weep for Abhimanyu, for the son who had died and the dreams of a new Aryavarta that had died with him.

24

‘GOVINDA!’ DHARMA BURST INTO THE MEDICS’ TENT, WHERE Partha was helping Govinda bind a poultice on to his rein-chafed, bleeding palms. Dhaumya was plying them both with a refreshing potion, as he warned Govinda that his palms would soon be covered with excruciating blisters if he took up the reins again without rest. ‘And,’ Dhaumya was saying, ‘do I have to remind you that you run the risk of losing your arm if you go on straining that shoulder?’

Govinda gestured to Shikandin, who was wrapping a linen bandage around his chest with Panchali’s help. ‘If he can be out there, so can I!’

‘What can I say, Govinda? I guess us Panchalas are just born tougher than you vagrant Yadus.’

‘Oi!’ Yuyudhana exclaimed. ‘There are enough vagrant Yadus out there for you to kill, Shikandin, don’t get a war started in here!’

‘Govinda!’ Dharma repeated, impatient that he did not have their attention as yet. He suddenly turned on Yuyudhana, ‘And you! What are you doing here? You’re not hurt, are you?’

‘No,’ Yuyudhana replied with narrowed eyes. ‘I’m just making sure that my friends won’t be either. Knowing these men, they’ll throw themselves out there the moment they are done here. Someone had better check their weapons, because they won’t, for sure!’

‘We are losing by the moment out there, and you are worried about your friends and their weapons?’

‘Swasti, Dharma,’ Govinda said, ‘The war isn’t over. We’re not dead. Not yet.’

‘We will be soon. You had all better get back into battle. Vasusena and Syoddhan are laying waste to anything that stands in their way. And Asvattama…well, he’s a man possessed. It’s nothing short of a massacre out there.’

‘I’ll take care of it,’ Shikandin stood up, waving at Govinda to sit back for a while longer.

‘Take Yuyudhana with you,’ Govinda instructed.

Partha said, apologetic, ‘It’s just some time to dusk – if you can hold them off, just long enough…’

‘No, Partha,’ Govinda interrupted even as Shikandin and Yuyudhana left. ‘Trust me, the battle won’t cease tonight.’

‘But…the rules…’ Dharma was aghast. ‘It was agreed that we stop fighting at sundown. That is the way wars have always been fought. How then…?’

Govinda said, ‘When will you realize that things have changed around us, Dharma? With Bhisma gone, this isn’t a family squabble anymore. After today, our enemy’s fury is for real. Your precious Dwaipayana and Suka are not in the habit of showing benevolence to those who defy them. This point marks the beginning of the end.’

‘Defy? Mine is the righteous stand, not Syoddhan’s.’

‘Tell that to Suka!’ Govinda shouted. ‘Tell that to all those who whisper in the Vyasa’s ear….’

‘…including your old friend, the Secret Keeper?’ Dharma did not raise his voice, but his tone did not lack anger as he said, ‘If my faith in the Firstborn was ill-placed, then so was your faith in….’

‘My faith has always been in people, Dharma,’ Govinda snapped. ‘My faith has been in humanity. That has not changed.’

He forced himself to simmer down as Dhaumya to put the last touches on his bandaged hand, and then stood up. ‘If Dron had meant for it to stop,’ he said, his voice even, ‘he would’ve given orders to retreat by now. He knows that they have an upper hand, despite Jayadrath’s death. Our…err… eccentric strategies have cost us much in terms of our defensive formations. Besides, his men are angry and feel deceived by what we have just done.

He won’t let that fury go to waste, rules of war or no rules of war. He will push on through the night, and he will hit us as hard as he can. Only a miracle can save us now.’

Dharma bristled at the statement. ‘I thought you don’t believe in miracles, Govinda.’

‘I don’t. But then, nothing else will change your mind, will it?’

Dharma realized he had been cornered. ‘How did you…?’

‘I’ve noticed you and Bhim arguing for the past few days. What else could it be about?’

‘So you know this too? What Hidimbya and his men really are? What they are capable of?’

Govinda did not answer the question directly. Instead he said, ‘Before there were Aryas, before there were Firewrights and the Firstborn, who walked these lands, Dharma?’

‘I… I don’t understand. What do you mean?’

‘Exactly what I said. What was there before we noble kings and scholars came along with our ways of life?’

‘I suppose…heathens, uncivilized brutes, forest-dwellers…’

‘And how did we get here? Are we invaders from another part of the world? Or were we created by the gods and sent down from the heavens? Who are we?’

‘I don’t have time for your theatrics, Govinda. What is it that you’re trying to say?’

Panchali spoke up. ‘I think he means that what you describe as Wright-craft existed long before the Firewrights came along to harness and study such things. Hidimbya’s people are proof of that, just as Virat’s people are proof that knowledge survives with or without its keepers, even without Divine Order… Knowledge is its own force, Dharma, just as humanity is. What Hidimbya can do for us can change the course of this war. Don’t shun it just because the Firewrights claimed such craft as their own.’

Dharma glared at Panchali, but when she met his gaze with calm understanding he could not help but feel a little pacified.

Govinda's voice intruded: 'We are losing, Dharma. That is a fact that you know as well as I do. We may have killed Jayadrath, but it is a minor victory, a moral victory alone. The war goes on, and the enemy clearly has the upper hand. As we speak, Nakul is fighting Vasusena and is coming off the worse for it. Even you've had no choice but to retreat, beaten back by Kritavarman. We don't even know where Dhrstyadymn is, and our formations have been broken through. Dhrupad, too, is missing. Bhim and Sadev are still out there fighting, but the rest of our soldiers huddle, desperate, in clusters that will sooner or later fall. The enemy has us on the brink of defeat and they know it. They will now fight to the end, fight to win. Please, for the sake of all those we have already lost; for Abhimanyu's sake, please consider this option…'

Dharma did not reply but continued to look at Panchali, as though conversing with her in silence. He took a deep breath and said, 'All right. But I want to know what exactly Hidimbya can do for us before I agree to let him and his men fight.'

Govinda said, 'Fair enough. Send for him, Dharma. It is time you met him. Besides, he can tell you best what it is that he and his people can do for you.'

The prospect that Hidimbya and his men could turn the tide of the war brought a sense of hope back to all of them. Panchali found herself resuming conversation with the others, though banter was still a long way off. She came across Bhim while making her way to the Command Tent, where Hidimbya was to meet with Dharma.

'Why didn't you tell me you had a son?' she demanded. 'You told me all about your romance with his mother!'

Bhim said, 'I was trying to impress you, Panchali. Admitting to having a son hardly a few years younger than you; I didn't think that was going to work.'

'Oh, but I am impressed! Really! You must be very proud of him…'

'I am. I just wish I could've seen more of him, over the years… I was barely eighteen when I met his mother and in all honesty, not much of

anything. I couldn't dream of disobeying Dharma and my mother, of arguing with them. Of course, I may have done so if I'd known she was carrying my child. I really wish now that I'd been there for Purbaya… that is…Hidimbya…'

'And have him turn out like you?' Panchali tried to jest, but the words felt hollow and forced. She added, once again sombre, 'He has come at the right time, Bhim. I'd lost courage, lost every sense of wanting to be happy again after Abhimanyu… Hidimbya brings hope to us all.'

With that bittersweet moment, the two friends arrived at the Command Tent. They entered and waited quietly, so as not to disturb the meeting in session. Panchali took the opportunity to study the newcomer whom everyone had spoken of but few had seen: Hidimbya, son of Bhim.

He was, she noted, nothing short of gigantic, but still had Bhim's lithe, graceful manner. His resemblance to his father was unmistakable, except of course for his dark skin, and his shiny, bald pate. She tried not to smile as she thought of the nickname, she had been told, it had earned him. His upper body was bare, and coils of black rope were wound over his right shoulder and under his left arm, covering his chest completely.

As Dharma acknowledged their presence, Hidimbya got up from his cross-legged stance on the floor. 'Bless me, Mother,' he greeted Panchali. 'Abhimanyu had told me about you…'

Panchali felt a lump in her throat at the mention of Abhimanyu's name. It collided with the surge of anger that rose in her stomach at the realization that the newcomer had not been offered a seat. She bit back the urge to mention the matter, deciding to save it for another day, and smiled at the tribal chief. 'Welcome, Hidimbya,' she wished him.

'There he is,' Bhim announced as Govinda came into the tent.

'Govinda Shauri?' Hidimbya's eyes lit up with excitement. 'It is an honour!'

'Likewise, Chief,' Govinda returned the greeting. 'Now tell me, how many men do you have with you?'

'Five thousand.'

‘That isn’t much! In fact, it’s nothing!’ Dharma exclaimed. He suddenly felt crushed. He had somehow assumed that Hidimbya had brought a division or more of men, and that it would turn the tide of the battle. ‘Five thousand…’ he dully repeated. ‘And what can you do, beyond shoot arrows? Have you any elephants or cavalry?’

‘No, Your Highness. We are miners.’

‘Miners? And what is that you could possibly mine in the middle of a battle?’

‘Black nitre. We mine nitre. That is our weapon.’

Black nitre. Hidimbya’s peculiar appearance finally made sense. Panchali had thought she recognized the nitre from its smell, but she had never seen it used this way, coated on ropes. She had always heard of it as a delicate and thus dangerous substance, but Hidimbya seemed the least concerned about it.

Once he had explained how the rope was used in battle, Hidimbya concluded by saying, ‘The effect it has on the enemy is greater the closer we are to their camp. How close can you get us?’

Govinda replied, ‘Right to their doorstep if you like. Pradymna, Daruka, Yuyudhana and I handle horses well, as do Sadev and Nakul. We will ride out as if we are carrying a warrior on the vehicle, but we should be able to fit about seven to ten of you on each rig. Maybe more, given that it is night. We can also get your men onto the field hidden in supply carts.’

‘Get us to the outer perimeter of the field, around the field. That should do. I’ll go with you, along with thirty of my best men. The rest will start from the other edges of the battlefield and work their way inwards. Remember, once we light the nitre, you lot need to get out of there quickly…’

‘What about you and your men?’

Hidimbya laid a hand on the coils of rope across his chest, ‘We have our ways of keeping safe. Besides, all of us lay out the nitre but only some of us are needed to set it alight. That is a risk we must take…’

‘It is a risk we all take, Hidimbya,’ Dharma declared. ‘Us, all the more so, for putting our faith in a measly five thousand men.’

‘I think, Dharma,’ Govinda interrupted, ‘that five thousand shall more than suffice. Now, if you’ll permit us, I’d like to take Hidimbya to meet the others…’

25

‘IMPRESSIVE,’ GOVINDA REMARKED AS PATTERNS OF FIRE, BEAUTIFUL and deadly, lit up the battlefield. Like dark waves washing ashore or giant flowers blooming in the dawn, the flames ran quickly up and down the landscape, following the nitre-coated ropes that Hidimbya and his men had laid out. From these waves rose a wall of heat, a slow shimmering of the air that could be smelt before it was seen. Hardly did the soldiers have time to react to the fiery air, to realize that it was burning away at their skin and hair, when the storm followed – a blast, as though the invisible walls had exploded outward, shattering fire and stone. Such, Hidimbya explained, was the effect of black nitre, burning slowly to release heat and then, expanding the air in an explosion as the blaze spread. The patterns, he added, were part of their craft – a means of ensuring the most damage to the enemy –in physical terms and also as a means of intimidation. But the patterns were not always complete or perfect. There, Hidimbya’s men had fallen, their work incomplete.

‘I lost more of my men than I’d expected,’ Hidimbya confessed. ‘It’s accepted that some fall while the nitre is laid out, but not one of those I sent to light the flint has come back alive. I guess our enemy is not that easily confounded… Speaking of which, seven-hooded Sesha save us, this man is unstoppable!’

‘Vasusena…’ Bhim informed him, following his son’s gaze into the distance.

‘He fights like a man possessed!’

‘A man scorned,’ Govinda corrected. ‘He is one of the best warriors Aryavarta has ever seen. Much has been denied him in his life…’

Bhim flinched at the statement, but Govinda went on, oblivious. ‘Aryavarta is full of men like you and him, Hidimbya; good men who’ve been wronged in the name of hierarchy and lineage.’

Hidimbya grinned, his teeth flashing white against his dark nitre-coated skin. ‘And there are men like you, who struggle to set things right.’

Govinda did not return the smile. His eyes were cold as he regarded the Rikshasa chief. ‘Don’t make the mistake of thinking that I’m a better man, a different man even. Don’t trust me more than you have to.’

‘Who do I trust then, Govinda?’

Govinda remained silent till Partha tapped him on the shoulder and informed him that Dharma and Vasusena were headed directly for each other on the battlefield.

‘Yourself, and no one else,’ Govinda said without looking at Hidimbya. With that, he and Partha rode off to Dharma’s aid.

The night passed its darkest point and though there was little light in the sky, the crisp turn of air heralded the dawn of a new day, not long away. Dharma had come off the worse for his skirmish with Vasusena. As had Partha. And Shikandin, Yuyudhana and Dhrstyadymn. Indeed, Dhrstydymn grudgingly admitted, if not for Yuyudhana’s timely intervention, he would have remained missing, decimated by Vasusena and his troops in a far corner of the battlefield. There was no doubt that Vasusena was turning out to be as great a threat as Dron – given particularly that the war had now come down to single combat. Where Dron was a master of strategy, Vasusena was simply an incomparable fighter, not just for the impressive array of Wright-weapons at his command but also for his valour and skill. Between the two enemy warriors, it seemed, Dharma’s army faced certain defeat.

‘What is it?’ Dharma wondered out loud. ‘What drives him so?’

‘The truth,’ Govinda replied before stalking off to see to his horses. His mood had improved little through the night’s battle and his weariness was beginning to show.

‘We’ve lost nearly three divisions during this day and night,’ Dhrstyadymn pointed out to Dharma. ‘We need some way of holding off till dawn, when we can hope for a quick respite.’

‘Why are you telling *me* that, muhira?’ Dharma snapped, holding a cloth up to the cut on his forehead. ‘You’re the commander of our armies; think of something! Or would you rather admit your defeat?’

‘No, Your Highness,’ Dhrstyadymn hissed through clenched teeth. He stared at Dharma’s back as the older man went off to nurse the rest of his wounds. ‘Right,’ he said once Dharma was out of earshot and threw up his hands in disbelief.

‘You know that my men will fight to the death,’ Shikandin pointed out. ‘I think we should be able to hold Vasusena off but we need to have a second line of defence, just in case. You don’t want the enemy overrunning us all the way to the camp now…’

‘I’ll hold the line myself,’ Dhrstyadymn promised.

With a nod, Shikandin was off.

Hidimbya stood around, uncertain about what he ought to do. He was now alone in the Command Tent, and had been given neither orders nor clue as to what was expected of him. And then, it dawned on him how kind the Fates had been to give him this chance of a lifetime. Smiling to himself, he set off to assemble his men.

‘Right,’ Hidimbya addressed his fellow miners. ‘It isn’t going well. We need to do something, boys. We’ve come into this far too late, but if we go out with glory, they won’t forget us soon, will they?’

‘Easy for you to say, Chief!’ one of the men retorted. ‘You’ll get the pick of Indra’s nymphs in heaven, wont you, now that you’re a Kuru prince.’

Hidimbya rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. ‘Mih! Have you ever seen a nymph? Give me a full-blooded Rikshasa any day, my friend. The last thing I want is for Indra to complain I broke his fragile things in two…’

A round of raucous, whole-hearted laughter rang through the crowd.

‘Tell you what,’ Hidimbya continued, ‘You keep the nymphs, I’ll take your pretty sister instead!’

‘You’d better, Chief,’ the soldier replied. ‘You’re married to her!’

More guffaws rang out loud, this time ebbing slowly, as each man thought of his family, of those he loved the most.

When Hidimbya spoke again, his voice was solemn. ‘There are about a thousand of us alive, but we can each take down eight hundred to a thousand men. That’s more than two whole enemy divisions.’

‘But that would work only if…’

‘If it’s a powerful explosion, in a concentrated area…Look, we can die one by one; or we can die together and leave a chance at victory behind us. What say you?’

As one, the men stood up, and raised their voices in a blood-curdling war call.

‘What was that?’ Govinda muttered.

Partha said, glancing up, ‘It’s almost dawn. The first streaks of red are in the sky.’

Govinda wordlessly pointed to the battlefield ahead, where more of Hidimbya’s nitre-flowers were blooming.

‘They look different,’ Partha said. Soon, both men understood why.

In what had to be a prearranged, well-timed plan, over a hundred blasts rocked the air. Some were so strong that bodies were flung from the ground as the earth shook with the force, their lifeless blood boiling within to make the cadavers burst in mid-air, drenching all that was around in a shower of pulpy flesh and blistering blood. Fearing for their lives, enemy and ally alike tried to retreat and take shelter, but to no avail: The explosions were not unplanned, merely unpredictable, and no one close enough to feel the blast of heat could ever outrun it. It was, however, a testament to the size of Syoddhan’s forces that many remained alive as the blasts ebbed and an eerie stillness came over the battlefield. Heaving sighs of relief, the enemy survivors began to retreat, in an orderly manner. Suddenly, as the bulk of the soldiers drew closer to their camp, huge rings of fire blossomed up on

all sides, cutting off their retreat and trapping men by the hundreds. Partha retched as the smell of burning flesh assaulted his nostrils.

Another round of blasts rocked the middle of the battlefield. Govinda was filled with foreboding. He immediately jerked the reins, getting his horses to rush right towards the centre of the carnage. By the time they reached the worst hit part of the battlefield, the attack was over. Their own commanders, each as surprised as the other, now joined them.

‘It’s mainly Syoddhan’s men who are dead. Nearly two divisions I think, maybe more,’ Dhrstyadymn quickly assessed.

‘Hidimbya!’ Govinda suddenly called out. He let go of the reins and jumped down from his rig. ‘Hidimbya! Hidimbya!’

‘Over here! Govinda, over here!’ Yuyudhana waved to them.

Govinda ran over to Yuyudhana. Together, the two men moved aside some debris to reveal Hidimbya’s tall frame. The debris had protected him from being charred painfully to death, but his end was clearly near. The blast had driven a sharp wedge through his chest. He bore the tell-tale marks of the enemy’s arrows and knives, the cuts now sealed shut from the heat of the flames around him.

‘Good thing…no hair,’ he gasped, as they pulled him out of the wreckage and away from fresh flames that had ignited nearby.

‘You planned this! You and your men, you planned this!’ Yuyudhana was incredulous.

The others clustered around. A distraught Bhim alternated between calling out to everyone to carry his son back to camp and barking harsh orders to fetch Dhaumya at once.

‘Father…’ Hidimbya called out.

Bhim fell to his knees and took his son’s hand in his. Gone was every bit of the bravado and strength he had shown moments ago. Now, Bhim was just a father.

‘Don’t cry for me, Father,’ Hidimbya wheezed. ‘I shall soon see my brother, Abhimanyu. We have many years to catch up on.’

‘He waits for you with a hero’s welcome, Hidimbya,’ Govinda affirmed.

‘He was a good man. It’s an honour to die to avenge him. It’s an honour to die for your victory, Govinda… Now you have a chance! Now, there is hope to win this… Fight well.’ Hidimbya reached out to squeeze Govinda’s hand with all the strength he had left in him. And then the Rikshasa’s arm was limp.

You’re a better man than I, Hidimbya, Govinda thought to himself as he watched Hidimbya’s life ebb out of him. *But who will die to avenge you?* Out loud he said nothing but closed the dead warrior’s eyes.

‘No!’ Bhim hissed. He let go of Hidimbya’s hand and sank his fingers into the red soil of Kuru’s Fields, his fingers digging into the blood-soaked mud as though he would tear the earth asunder, rip apart the fabric of Time and turn the tide of events to bring his son back. He sprang to his feet, head thrown back, red hands clenched and let out a roar of agony that seem to come from the very bowels of the earth to take audible form in his being. He continued to rant and howl, sometimes swearing vengeance, at other times heaping curses and, most of all, giving wordless voice to the unbearable pain inside him.

Govinda felt an overwhelming need for solitude. Standing up, he headed back towards their rig, oblivious to the fact that Partha was right next to him, calling out his name. In a daze, he climbed onto the vehicle and picked up the reins, but instead of readying his horses he simply stood there, eyes unseeing as he looked at the lightening horizon. Slowly, Govinda became aware of Partha’s voice, of words filling the desolation across the battlefield.

‘See what your so-called compassion has done!’ Partha was shouting. ‘See what you’ve done to us, Govinda. Two sons lost in the blink of an eye, in a single night. The future of the Kurus gone, forever. My son! Bhim’s son! Dead. For what?’

For what? Govinda stirred, taking in his surroundings. Over two divisions of Syoddhan’s men lay dead. Fighting had stopped. The enemy commanders had retreated. Vasusena was nowhere to be seen.

Govinda laughed.

Throwing down the reins, he laughed out loud and jumped up, shouting with joy, ‘Yes! Yes! We can win this. We can win this now!’ Partha, Dharma, even Yuyudhana stared horrified as Govinda whirled over the field, basking in the rays of the setting moon. ‘Yes! Hah, yes! Hara be praised!’ He appeared to hum a tune, some song as he danced around the corpses that littered the field.

‘He’s gone mad!’ Dhrstyadymn exclaimed.

Shikandin’s cool grey-green eyes gleamed as he said, ‘He *is* mad, brother. Mad enough to love life to death!’

Finally, panting and laughing intermittently, Govinda clambered back onto the rig and took up the reins once again.

‘Govinda…’ Partha began.

‘Ah, Partha! I haven’t been this happy since we began this war. I’ll sleep well tonight or for what’s left of it…’ Without further explanation he drove away, leaving the others to see to Hidimbya’s cremation.

Back at the camp, contrary to his assertions, Govinda did not sleep. He stood staring into the distance, at Hidimbya’s blazing pyre. Next to it, a few last embers glowed from within the pile of ash that had once been a man called Abhimanyu.

26

THE SUN ROSE OVER A FIELD THAT HELD MORE DEATH AND DEBRIS than it did life. Where it had once seemed that Kuru's Fields was too large a space for living men, it now felt too small to hold the endless blanket of corpses that was spread around as far as the eye could see. Combat had stopped just a while ago and would recommence soon. Men and medics had come onto the battlefield to clear it of the fallen – an impossible task, for the dead were too many and the living too few. Nevertheless, the weary medics from both camps went about their tasks as best they could, tending first to those who might live and then to those bound to die, so as to ease their suffering. For those who were already gone, only scavengers had time. The carrion birds had got bolder, no longer deterred by the hyenas and jackals that had emerged from the woods to partake of the waiting feast. There was plenty on offer, and none who could still bear to eat needed leave hungry.

Back at the camps, tallies were being kept of the dead and the missing. A number of Dharma's lieutenants and commanders – Dhrupad among them – were as yet unaccounted for. Chief Virat had been found dead, his tortured end evidenced by the astra-weapon that was still wedged in his flesh when Bhim found him. His son, Sankha, Bhim had found alive, but barely so, and the prince had died on the way back to camp.

Shikandin and Govinda stood on the edge of the battlefield leaning against an overturned supply-cart. Shikandin was wiping his face and hands with a wet cloth. He had just been pulled off the search for his father; he was tired and his injuries from Bhisma's weapon burned and stung as they healed. He insisted, to whoever enquired, that he was all right but for a limp

in his leg that would heal soon – an optimistic view that Dhaumya, in his opinion as a medic, did not share.

‘Maybe,’ Govinda said, ‘it’s time to face reality… We’ve been fighting fourteen days and a night. From seven divisions, we are down to less than two. Most of the elephants and cavalry horses are gone and we have less than fifty chariot-rigs remaining. For all the planning and strategizing, it has come down to hand-to-hand combat, suicide ploys and bloody, heartless masssacre. We’d be dead right now if it hadn’t been for Hidimbya. How long do you think we can go on? How long do you think we can hold out against Dron and Vasusena?’

‘You’d think we’d have called it off already…’ Shikandin grunted.

‘Hah!’

‘I’m telling you, Govinda. Will you call it off?’

Govinda raised a sardonic eyebrow. Few other than Shikandin would have been so incisive with him and got away it. But he ignored the comment, and went on. ‘Dron is giving us a hard time. Bhisma was a benevolent old man compared to this terror, not to mention his astra-weapons were like toys compared to what the Acharya posseses! We can’t let him go on this way…’ He looked up as Dhrstyadymn came running towards where they stood.

‘We found him…’ Dhrstyadymn shouted, as soon as they were within earshot. ‘Father… Dhaumya says it may be too late already…’

The three men ran to the medic’s tent. Panchali was already there.

‘Forgive me, Shikandin,’ Dhaumya said, as Shikandin made to enter. ‘He doesn’t want to see you.’

Shikandin was not at all disappointed. ‘Go on,’ he told Dhrstyadymn. ‘Go. You need to see him. Our laws say he must declare you King. Go.’

‘But…?’

‘Go.’

Shikandin moved away, Govinda at his side. Yudhamanyu, Kshatradharman and Uttamaujas came running up, but Shikandin stopped them from going into the tent.

‘But…but what about Grandfather?’ Yudhamanyu asked.

‘He is your grandfather, yes, Yudhamanyu. But I am not his son, and your brothers are not his grandchildren.’

‘But…’ Uttamaujas protested.

‘Let it be,’ Yudhamanyu said, to everyone’s surprise. ‘If you aren’t a prince of Panchala, then there is no need for me to be one. We are our father’s children; it is more than enough.’

Shikandin felt a lump in his throat. He glanced at Govinda and saw his friend visibly moved by Yudhamanyu’s declaration. ‘I…’ Shikandin began, but before he could say more, Panchali, Dhrstyadymn and Dhaumya came out of the tent, forlorn. Shikandin stepped forward, pulling Uttamaujas along by the arm. With genuine affection in his eyes, he knelt on one knee before his brother and bowed his head. Yudhamanyu and Kshatradharman quickly followed. It took a short while for it to sink in, but soon Panchali and everyone else around them were bowing in deference to the new King of Panchala.

Dhrstyadymn, however, looked at no one but Shikandin and saw nothing but genuine pride in his brother’s eyes. *Someday*, he promised himself, *I’ll do right by my brother and his sons. But, for now…* His voice heavy and commanding, he said, ‘Dron. I want Dron’s head. Help me get him, brother.’

Shikandin stood up. ‘As you command, my king.’

Govinda added, ‘We’ll get Dron. We have to, if any of us wants to stay alive.’

Dhrstyadymn turned to Govinda. ‘The question is how…’ His eyes were red, and his voice shook as he said, ‘For two weeks I’ve given everything I’ve got to get my hands on the Acharya but it has been impossible. And now? He is too well guarded, even better than Syoddhan had guarded Bhisma. Whatever forces they have left, they will now surely use to defend him because they know we will come after Dron, and…’

‘Are these really tears of mourning for the man you called “Father”, Dhrstyadymn?’ Govinda gently interrupted. ‘Or are they tears of fear for the man you’ve loved as a son would his father? No, don’t bother to answer.

But now that you know this fear, you know what it is you need to defeat Dron.'

'I…I don't understand, Govinda.'

Shikandin added, 'For what it's worth, neither do I.'

Govinda smiled. 'If and when the King of Panchala stops acting like a ridiculously noble warrior and begins to think as a son, he will understand…'

Dhrstyadymn fell silent, and turned to Panchali. His sister, apparently, found no mystery in Govinda's words. Her eyes already held the answer. He understood.

'Well, Commander?' Govinda prompted.

With a deep breath, Dhrstyadymn began issuing instructions.

27

WARS, THEY SAID OF OLD, WERE HONOURABLE WHEN FOUGHT righteously, and demonical when fought for the thrill of combat. Asvattama Bharadvaja thought of his actions as being in the former category, but he could not deny that the brutality involved in war and the aggression it awakened in him gave him great pleasure. The battlefield was his element, his home. Here, he could do no wrong. Here, he was not the disappointing son, but the consummate, undefeated warrior who made his teacher, his father, proud.

Asvattama laughed at the notion. It made the soldiers he faced all the more afraid for it. Six men, all hardy warriors, surrounded him and more men on horses and chariots rallied behind them. Behind those men, he knew, Shikandin, Yuyudhana and a few others held the line, preventing any of Syoddhan's men from coming to his aid. They did not press in on him, preferring to leave that task to their subordinates. It was, Asvattama noted, a mistake. Not one man who met his eye doubted that he, a lone, blood-soaked man on foot, holding nothing but a sword in each arm, was the more lethal of the two factions.

With a yell, the six soldiers ringing him closed in, at once. It took just a few instants for Asvattama to move, hacking and stabbing, till they all lay contorted and torn on the dirt of the battlefield. Asvattama was not yet done. With a wild yell, he threw himself at the next enemy line, swinging up on to a horse to unseat the mounted solider with a kick, even as he drove his sword through the neighbouring man. Then he jumped off the horse, bodily bringing down the three soldiers who had rushed at him on foot.

An amorphous cry to 'kill the demon' went up within the enemy ranks and they came at him from all directions. It was what he was waiting for.

He stood his ground, keenly aware of the enemy's blood as it splashed on his face, soaked his clothes, seeped onto his tongue through his clenched teeth. The salty, metallic taste was an elixir and he could feel himself wanting more, like some vengeful god demanding human sacrifice to sate his hunger. He stopped only when there were no more to be killed and stood reeling in ecstasy, panting hard.

'Asvattama!' the voice was dim at first, and then sounded louder, more urgent. 'Asvattama! Asvattama!'

He turned to see Kripa standing at the periphery of the carnage, an expression of disgusted awe on his face. Asvattama walked over to him, stabbing a thrashing soldier on the way, without breaking his stride. 'What is it, Uncle?'

It took a moment for Kripa to gather his thoughts, but even that did not help his coherence. 'I…we…we've been looking for you everywhere… Dhrstyadymn…'

Asvattama surveyed his surroundings. Shikandin and the others were nowhere to be seen. Instead of attacking him, they had all withdrawn. Clearly their task had been to detain, not destroy. Suspicion grew in Asvattama, but it was tempered at once by the truth of what he knew.

He said, amused. 'They tried to lure my father into a trap, did they? I wish I could have seen that ploy play out. What did Father do? Laugh in their face when they told him I was under attack?'

Kripa did not fully understand. 'They told him you were dead.'

'Really? Even better. I'm sure my father must have thanked them for it. Who performed the honour? Govinda? Or was it Partha, the beloved son my father never had?'

'It was Bhim. He said he had killed Asvattama. Your father did not believe him, so he asked Dharma.'

'Ah, Dharma Yudhisthir the Righteous. Go on, Uncle. This is a most interesting story and we have all day. No man dares come within feet of me while I hold my sword. Well,' he chuckled, 'not even otherwise.'

'You don't understand, Asvattama,' Kripa was stern. 'I don't know what you think of your father, or what you believe he thinks of you, but I can tell

you this: You are all he has ever lived for. You are his dream, his hope, his greatest creation – not just in the fact that he sired you but also in that he taught you and trained you. Partha? Partha is his student and dear to him, no doubt. But you are his son. He never forgot that, though I know he did not show it – not the way you expected him to. If you still don't believe me…'

Asvattama frowned, a sense of unease stirring in the pit of his stomach. 'What happened, Uncle?'

Kripa drew a deep breath, forcing evenness into his voice. 'Your father would never disbelieve Dharma, you know that. When Dharma was deliberately ambiguous, saying things about death being everywhere and who could say whether a man or an elephant named Asvattama was dead, your father was too distraught to think, to wonder why Dharma said what he did. Before I could stop him, he rode right into their hands. I tried to help him, my son, but…'

'Who?' Asvattama's voice had lost all levity. It was low and cold.

'Dhrstyadymn. He attacked Dron and…'

'Where is my father?'

Kripa pointed, unable to say the words out loud.

Asvattama ran over to his rig, where one of the two horses and his charioteer lay dead. He used his sword to cut the other steed free of its reins and, mounting the horse, set off in the direction Kripa had indicated. Kripa followed close behind.

'Father!' Asvattama cried out when he saw the wreckage of Dron's chariot. Syoddhan and Vasusena were already on the ground next to the rig, kneeling over a blood-covered figure. Asvattama jumped off his horse and ran to join them. 'Father!' he called out. 'Agni be damned! No! Father!' He sank down on his knees and, raising Dron's head, placed it on his lap. He felt a wet warmth soak through his robe and stain his thigh. Only then did he see that Dron's neck had been partly severed from his body. It was a miracle that his father still held on to life.

'Father…? Syoddhan, get another rig. We need to get him back to the camp right now! Where…where are the medics? Father!'

Slowly, the Acharya opened his eyes. He blinked hard, focusing on the figures around him till he finally saw his son. Asvattama nodded in acknowledgement, fighting back his tears. His eyes fixed on his son, Dron reached into his waistband and took out a small bundle of linen, the humble wrappings belying the worth of what lay inside. With great effort, he held it out to Asvattama. His tongue moved in speech, but no words came from him.

Asvattama understood, though he did not know what hurt him more: that his father had no words of affection for him even as he lay dying or that the war had come to this. ‘Father, I….’

Dron raised a bloody hand, placed it on his son’s head in blessing, but then drew it down his face in a taunt. His blessing would be a curse, till he was avenged.

This time, when Dron held out the small bundle, Asvattama took it. He knew what ghastly power it contained; in fact, it had been beyond his father to wield. If anyone could use, it would have to be him.

Little Rudra, his father had called him in childhood. Lord of Destruction.

Dron’s eyes remained wide open, but the fire in them ebbed away, along with his life. Asvattama could swear that in death too, his father was staring at him, goading him on to destroy and to kill. He could take it no more.

With a ferocious howl that held hatred, fury, pain and every dark emotion imaginable, Asvattama stood up, shedding all reason and emotion from his being like a cloak to reveal the darkness under it. His tall frame was taut, as though he was stone come to life; not the flawless marble that his pale skin was often compared to but harsh, hard granite, bleached of its true colour into an otherworldly skeleton of itself. All that was warm and alive had seeped out of him. He was now the embodiment of Death.

Snarling, he unwrapped the linen bundle his father had given him and stared at the telltale wooden box. Inside, he knew, was a soft, powdery metal as deadly as it was fragile. For years now, his father had kept this one secret from everyone, including the Grandsire and Dwaipayana. An astra-weapon like no other. Always, the Firstborn and their servitor kings had

supposed the Bramha-weapon and the Naga-weapon were the most infallible of all Firewright discoveries. Few knew of the last and most potent discovery the Wrights had made, the discovery that had led to the beginning of their end. Now, at the cost of revealing this secret, Asvattama would have his vengeance.

It doesn't matter any more, he told himself. In these two weeks of war, all secrets had been revealed, hidden hoards of weapons destroyed and old powers cast down. First Bhisma, then he and his kinsmen, now Vasusena – every single vassal and ruler had emptied their hearts and arsenals, revealing the last remaining traces of Firewright weaponry. All except Govinda.

Asvattama smiled, as he saw Govinda's plan, the genius of it. Dharma's Empire had been a way of setting free the true knowledge of the Firewrights – the knowledge that brought prosperity and peace. Now, Govinda had used the war in a most effective manner to cleanse Aryavarta of its old, decaying beliefs and the last vestiges of all that had been wrong and dangerous in the Firewrights. In his understanding Asvattama found peace, knowing that he had played his part. For a moment, his mind drifted to the man he suspected to be the Secret Keeper but had not questioned in all these years, for no reason other than his innate trust in Govinda Shauri. It occurred to him for an instant that it had taken him long enough to identify the sentiment.

Then he cast all thought aside. Thinking, reasoning, feeling, mourning – those were things that human beings did, and being human was a luxury his father had just taken from him. He was, had always been, nothing more than a finely honed instrument of destruction.

The warrior studied the battlefield and instructed the aghast yet delighted Syoddhan: 'Get all our men to withdraw. Tell them to take cover under anything wooden, or under cloth. And you and the other commanders better get away from here, too.'

'Asvattama…'

'Go!'

The tone brooked no argument and an awed Syoddhan rushed to comply.

Throwing aside his weapons, Asvattama used both hands to open the box. Carefully, he took but a piece of the fragile metallic rock from inside it and held the fragment in his closed fist. It stung the skin of his palm, and he felt his eyes begin to water. His nostrils flared as he breathed it in, the odourless substance burning away at his insides. Clenching his teeth, he bore the searing ache, remembering nothing but his father’s final breath.

As though spurred by his vengeance the wind turned, moving away from his men and towards the enemy. With an angry yell, the warrior hurled the rock into the air with all his might. It splintered into dust with the very force of the throw. And then, like some demon from Patala, the dust came alive.

Chest heaving, Asvattama watched with satisfaction as it floated, hovering briefly in the air before descending like a black mist over Chief Virat’s divisions. As the screams began to rent the air, a smile spread slowly across his face.

28

‘…A WHOLE DIVISION, ALL VIRAT’S MEN,’ DHRSTYADYMN was briefing the others when Dharma stormed into the command tent.

‘And Bhuminjaya?’ Partha asked, referring to Virat’s son.

Dhrstyadymn shook his head. Save the broken Uttara, none of the warriors in Chief Virat’s family was now alive.

‘You can stop him,’ Dharma declared, looking straight at Partha. ‘You can stop Asvattama. Dron taught you both the use of the Bramha-astra, the deadliest of weapons. At least, it was the deadliest known weapon till this new abomination, whatever it is called, was unleashed upon us. Be that as it may, you can still use the Bramha-weapon…’

‘I can’t.’

‘If you’re concerned about my approval, it is all right. I’ve known for long that the Acharya taught you to use astra-weapons. Dwaipayana told me about it when he arranged for the Gandiva to given to you. He told me just as the Grandsire had defended Aryavarta using Wright-weapons, someday, so would you…’ he trailed off as a childhood conversation and a pleasant memory of the one he now considered his mortal enemy flitted through his mind.

Dharma continued, as though quoting another’s words: ‘There are but two things worth guarding in the world – uncorrupted good and undiluted evil. Good is a great power, and it must be preserved and passed on. Evil must be protected from itself. That is what the Grandsire did. That is what I have tried to do. And that is what we must do now. I mean it, Partha. When the enemy is not bound by morality, our priority is to preserve the greater principle at stake. What Asvattama has now done…This is precisely the

kind of warfare the Grandsire fought against, this is why men like him were needed, to rein in the might of the Firewrights. And now… The only hope for righteousness lies in our victory. Use the Bramha-astra, Partha.'

'I'm telling you, I can't!'

'Here we go again,' Govinda muttered under his breath. 'What is it this time, Partha? Asvattama's your secret brother-in-law? Oh wait, he doesn't have a sister, does he?'

'No! I…it's just that it won't work against him. The Bramha-weapon, it's useless against him…'

'What do you mean?' Dharma challenged. 'How can he be immune to it?'

'Not immune. Just resilient. He just shuts his senses down against it. I don't know, it's not a skill Dron taught either of us but Asvattama does it.'

'Is that possible?' Bhim asked.

Govinda affirmed, 'It is.'

'How do you know this, Partha?' Shikandin asked.

'I… Asvattama and I, we got into an argument once, when we were very young, and I…'

A combined gasp of dread filled the room.

'Did the Acharya know about this?' Dharma finally said.

'No,' Partha replied. 'He assumed Asvattama had used the weapon against me. For some reason, Asvattama did not protest…'

'That explains how you suddenly became a hero overnight,' Shikandin's tone was scathing.

Govinda raised a calming hand. 'All right. Just do what you can to keep Asvattama in check, Partha. Let's focus on this new weapon he's got. Bhim, you saw it being used, didn't you?'

'Yes, Govinda. And, I confess, it just didn't make sense! I have no idea how he can control it, but I saw him mutter an incantation and release it into the air. Moments later, the black rain began and like some cloak of darkness it turned towards the Matsya divisions…'

Govinda inhaled sharply, but then said, 'Go on, Bhim.'

‘It was… I don’t know what it was, Govinda, but it was like he has the powers of the Wrights of old. Asvattama, Devala…I can’t imagine which bastard created such a weapon, one that can destroy so many at a time! And to think of the pain those soldiers must have endured… Yabha!’ The hardy man shuddered as he remembered the massacre he had witnessed, the way the men had run in blind terror, screaming, tearing at their own eyes, their skin, in a bid to rid themselves of their agony.

‘Mih!’ Govinda let out a curse and then a few more. The others watched, astonished, as the usually placid man stormed about the tent in a fit of rage. After an exchange of worried glances with his brothers, Partha was about to intervene when Shikandin flashed him a look of warning. Reluctantly, Partha waited.

At length, Govinda’s fit wore down. He breathed out hard and stood still.

Panchali asked him, a hint of amusement in her voice, ‘You know exactly what this weapon is, don’t you, Govinda?’

‘Yes, Panchali. It’s called the Narayana-astra, the weapon of Narayana.’

‘But the Narayana-astra is just a myth!’ Partha began. ‘The weapon with no counter…I assumed that was just some aggrandized tale concocted to make the Wrights seem all-powerful… Ghora Angirasa’s greatest and deadliest work…’

Govinda snorted, disdainful. ‘That’s what you said about Bhisma’s Agneya-astra, the black-nitre weapon, too. Trust me, Partha, most of what you call myth existed at some point or the other.’

Panic set in anew at the prospect of hitherto unknown weapons, and the discussion grew animated.

‘Swasti! Peace!’ Govinda finally called out, at which everyone settled down, though not without some mumbled protests and residual complaints.

‘The Narayana-astra,’ Govinda explained, ‘is not as terrifying as you think. It’s not something that the Wrights created, but rather something that they discovered.’

‘What do you mean?’ Nakul asked.

‘There are many elements whose existence we know of, but we do not always know what they are made of or what they can be used for. Things we today apply as medicine; some herbs, for example, were once just that – herbs. It takes keen observation and curiosity to wonder why things are the way they are, and to examine…’

‘What does this have to with…?’ Dharma impatiently interrupted.

‘What is called the Narayana-astra is simply a metal, a very rare element and one that is rather unstable. It is difficult to find, even in impure form. But what makes this element special is that it is attracted to iron and things made of iron. Weapons, for instance.’

‘So that’s why it went towards the Matsya division!’ Bhim gasped.

‘Yes. What Asvattama would have done was wait for the right wind conditions and then hurled a piece of this metal into the air. It would have broken at once, but the pieces would still hover together like a cloud because each piece would attract the other. Carried by the wind, this black cloud, or mist as you saw it, would move along till a huge body of iron – weapons in this case, attracted it. At which point, it would come down as black rain…’

‘What does this…this thing or mist do…?’

‘The dust isn’t heavy enough to hurt if it falls on to you. But its effect is not meant to be that. If inhaled, it can cause the lungs to bleed, possibly burst. It burns the eyes and nostrils, the skin… Trust me, it’s excruciating; like being charred alive…’

‘Then why isn’t it used in their poisons?’ Dhaumya ventured. ‘I’ve never heard of this substance, Govinda…’

‘It *was* used in poisons. In fact, for long, that was the sole possible use because purifying it was very difficult. But as far as toxins go, it was too troublesome to bother with. It was after the Firewrights discovered a way to extract pure dust or small pebble-like pieces that the Narayana-astra became possible.’

Dharma said, ‘This is all very instructional. But it doesn’t tell me what to do! Or do you want me to do nothing?’

‘Actually, Dharma,’ Govinda was unruffled, ‘that’s exactly what I want you to do. It is the only way there is of escaping the astra. There is no counter, only a defence.’

Dharma stared at Govinda, his silence more disparaging that any words of incredulity he could have found.

Govinda sighed and said, ‘Do you know how a lodestone works, how it can attract iron and some other metals? Well, this works in exactly the same way, except that a tiny piece of it is far more powerful that a chunk of lodestone. So, imagine you had hundreds and thousands of pieces of dangerous lodestone hurled at you, how would you try and escape that?’

‘I’d throw away my weapons… my armour as well…’ Partha said.

Sadev said, ‘But that would still leave the problem of what happens if you go back for your weapons or say, inhale some of the air around the region… the lodestone – or in this case, the Narayanaastra – would still be stuck onto the iron.’

‘Lodestone, yes,’ Govinda said. ‘Not this. This is a fragile, white substance that crumbles to the touch. The closer it gets to the ground, the more it tends to be drawn to the earth, to the surface. Once it is mixed with mud and dust, it ceases to be effective till you re-extract and purify it again…’

‘So, all we have to do is lay down our weapons? And cover our heads and eyes? Hu!’ Dharma exclaimed. ‘Are you sure, Govinda? This sounds stupid. Hardly like a strategy to repel a feared astra-weapon.’

‘I’m sure, Dharma. Absolutely sure. You see, Ghora Angirasa did not discover this weapon alone. He had a student…’ Govinda waited, letting the implications sink in.

Fear and revulsion flickered across some of the faces but was dispelled with practised politeness. The anger, however, stayed. Govinda met their enraged gazes without flinching. ‘I will not justify its discovery. Nor will I apologize for it. If you can bring yourselves to, consider for a moment the circumstances of its creation. Imagine living in terror of footsteps at the door of your hut, of soldiers with heavy iron weapons who would drag you out in the middle of the night, rape men and women alike in a bid to extract

information and, at the end of it all, burn alive those they wished to condemn as Firewrights…'

Partha said, 'So you wanted to find a way to defend yourselves and so… well, I must admit it is as brilliant as it is brutal. I suspect that the dust is not attracted to Wright-metal at all, is it? It wouldn't affect you at all, but it would decimate your enemy.'

Govinda was taken aback. Then he sighed, accepting the bloody accolade. 'I deserve that, I suppose. But if you can still find it in your heart to believe it, Partha, the idea of the Narayana-astra was not to decimate the enemy; it was to protect the defenceless. Not those who sought power on the back of Wright-weapons and science, nor those whose reason had given way to their dogmatic beliefs, their mindless rivalry with the Firstborn. It was to protect those who were victims, simple victims – the innocent villagers of Surasena, Panchala, Kashi… All the realms that now pride themselves on living in consonance with Divine Order.'

Clearing his throat, Govinda added, 'I do not claim to be a good man; certainly not a man beyond making mistakes. But that does not, cannot, stop me from calling to question the atrocities of others. Firewright, Firstborn, I don't care anymore. All I want is to end this war, to win it. And if you want the same, then this is what you must do. Tomorrow, on the battlefield, throw down your weapons and step away from them. Avoid all armour. If you feel your eyes begin to burn, lay yourself out on the ground and cover your face and head with your hands. What doesn't fall to the ground will eventually be blown away…'

Dharma was still doubtful. 'As simple as that?'

'As simple as that. And that, Your Highness, is exactly what makes the Narayana-astra so dangerous.'

'It's not worth it,' Dharma argued, as some the others nodded in agreement. 'Dishonour is worse than death. To throw our weapons down, to lie in silent submission… We'd become laughing stocks, Govinda. Truly, I'd rather bear the torment of the astra, I'd rather bear death.'

Govinda smiled, tired. 'We called it the Narayana-astra for a reason, Dharma. Now, I am weary beyond mention and need to get back to my tent

to lie in submission for the night.' With that he walked out of the Command Tent.

Dharma watched him leave, then turned to the others. 'Well?'

Nakul shrugged. 'Narayana… interesting play on words, if you think about it. Nara-ayana or resting man. Trust Govinda to come up with a cheeky name.'

'I think,' Panchali ventured, 'that it's more than a cheeky name. When have you known Govinda to speak in plain terms?'

Sadev said, 'You're right, Panchali. And in that lies the solution to your problem, Dharma. The riddle or challenge, if you will. I think I begin to understand what Govinda keeps saying about means and ends…'

'Which is?' Dharma said.

'If the ends justify the means, as you claim they do, then where is the dishonour in feigning or mimicking surrender in order to win this particular encounter? Why bother with what you describe as dishonourable, when it can help achieve our ends? Do you see?'

'But what you're saying justifies my argument. The ends do justify the means, do they not?'

'And what is it you must give up to use these means, Agraja?'

'Honour? A sense of self? But surely these are trappings, mere illusions…oh!' Dharma paused as he saw the riddle within the riddle, the greatness of the cosmos mirrored in the mundane. 'The divinity within humanity…' he muttered one of Govinda's oft-repeated phrases under his breath, trying to make sense of it all.

'And so,' Sadev concluded, 'the cowherd named his weapon after the Supreme Being himself. He couldn't be more irreverent…or persuasive.'

'All this philosophy is fine,' Dhrstyadymn interrupted. 'But I still need Dharma to decide. If Asvattama uses the Narayana-astra again, tomorrow, what is it that we are to do?'

Dharma thought long and hard. Panchali watched him, seeing doubt and certainty alternate in the shifting colours of his eyes. Whatever his flaws, Dharma's intelligence and learning were not in doubt and, despite his adamant nature, his love for the truth forced him to always accept it when

he could be brought to see that he was wrong. She reached out, laying her fingers on his arm. He turned to her, his expression one that she had not seen in a long while, not since the past days of friendship and companionable affection that had once been at the core of their relationship. Happiness fluttered within her, along with a glimmer of hope. She smiled and gently pressed his arm before removing her hand. Her touch seemed to help Dharma arrive at his decision.

'Very well. If Asvattama uses the astra, we shall throw down our weapons. We shall,' Dharma allowed himself a smile, 'all bow to the spirit of the Creator within us.'

Syoddhan clutched at his sides, laughing hard, so hard that tears rolled down his cheeks. Dussasan was howling and slapping his thigh with glee. All around them, men jeered and celebrated at the sight of Dharma's army prone on the ground in what appeared to be surrender.

'You've done it, Asvattama!' Syoddhan grabbed hold of the warrior and shook him, delight apparent in his voice. 'Look at them! Look at them! You've done it!'

But Asvattama was far from happy.

'What…?' Syoddhan asked, confused.

'He knows. Govinda knows how to defend against it. Puuya! The weapon is useless now.'

'Then cast it again! Come now, Asvattama, with you on our side, victory is inevitable. Cast the weapon again. They've already been forced to rub their noses in the dirt. Dishonour has been meted out. Only death is left and that too we shall send their way. Go on!'

Asvattama's eyes glowed golden-brown. He said nothing, but raised his right hand. Syoddhan stared, revolted. The skin had burnt off Asvattama's hand, revealing not just the red, bloody flesh but also the white bone underneath. With his other hand, Asvattama held out the wooden box Dron had given him, offering it to Syoddhan. Syoddhan immediately recoiled. Asvattama smirked, cold and wrathful. He threw the box into the nearby river and stalked off.

Syoddhan turned back to the battlefield. Already, the mirth and celebration around him was beginning to dim as Dharma and his men picked themselves off the ground and got set to do battle again.

‘What happened? What happened?’ Dussasan asked, in a stupid daze.

‘Nothing. We fight.’

Vasusena understood too well what weighed on Syoddhan’s mind. ‘Indeed,’ he said, snarling. ‘We fight. And they will die. Come, Dussasan! Let’s cheer your brother up with some blood. We won’t let Dharma and his brothers forget that they licked mud right in front of us, at our feet. It’s a fine start to the day, and I’ll make sure it ends well!’

With mighty cries, the two men made their horses rear up in challenge and headed straight for Dharma.

29

‘THE REASON WHY,’ VASUSENA EXPLAINED TO THOSE GATHERED in Syoddhan’s Command Tent, ‘the Bramha-astra is used in duels but not so much in wars despite its reputation as the deadliest astra ever, is that the toxin needs to penetrate the skin and enter the opponent’s bloodstream for it to induce fearful hallucinations. It can still be effectively used on the battlefield – often a few terrified, maddened men are all it takes to cause confusion, force the enemy to turn on their own. But weapons such as these…’ he pointed to the array of gleaming Wright-metal spread out on the table before him, ‘these are more like the Agneya-astra that Bhisma used. They are more suited to widespread damage and use in a war.’

‘They are also reprehensible,’ said Shalya, King of Madra. ‘To kill thousands at a single go… What chance does the enemy have to mount an effective defence? It is dishonourable, nothing less.’

‘You didn’t think so when the Grandsire fought with weapons such as these. Yet he is a hero, a scion of your race and I…’

‘Vasusena, please…’ Syoddhan tried to calm his friend down.

Shalya continued to frown his disapproval. ‘Those weapons,’ he hissed, ‘were sanctified. Dwaipayana himself blessed them, he believed that the Grandsire was the best custodian of all Wright-weapons, for in his hands they could be put to good use, in defence of righteousness.’

‘And when Asvattama invoked that demon from hell, whatever it was…? That dust-weapon? Who sanctified that?’

Asvattama drawled, taunting as always, ‘It needed no sanctification. I am Angirasa by birth, and a scholar by birth and training. Above all, I am Arya, and that too one who is loyal to the Firstborn. That is enough.’

‘How convenient for you…’

‘How would you know…Suta!’

Speechless with acrimony, Vasusena glared at Asvattama.

Syoddhan looked from one to the other, not sure which of his friends to placate.

Before he could speak, Shalya sighed and began to explain as though to a child, ‘If I were to put it bluntly, Vasusena, Dwaipayana gave Bhisma and a few others the authority to use those weapons so as to ensure that no scoundrel who aspired to rule or pretended to be Arya would hold us hostage to power. I think the Vyasa meant for men like you to be in the second category, not the first. As a matter of fact, that is the very system, the principle of Divine Order that we struggle to defend. It is that principle that makes me act wholeheartedly for Syoddhan instead of against him. Duty and Divine Order are greater than avuncular affections. Not once during this war have I hesitated to attack any of Dharma’s soldiers, including my own nephews. I want to know that counts for something; I want to know that there is a value to the larger principle that I fight for.’

Vasusena’s mind drifted to his unexpected meeting with Govinda on the eve of the final muster. He longed to tell Syoddhan, to explain to him what it was that Govinda truly wanted. But neither the present company nor the dour look on Syoddhan’s face suggested that his confession would be welcome. ‘All right, then,’ he declared. ‘Ask them. Ask your precious Firstborn what they want of us in this situation. I thought you fought for their way of life; on your head be it to stand in their way.’

‘And what do you care for the Firstborn and what they want?’

‘I care for my friend. I care for Syoddhan and what he wants. And if he believes that his honour lies in fighting for Divine Order, then so be it. He, in turn, knows what I wanted, but it is now too late for that.’.

‘Be that as it may,’ Asvattama intervened, ‘Dwaipayana is not here. Nor is Suka…’

‘Tell them to come,’ Vasusena suddenly flared up again. ‘I dare them to come here and look out on the battlefield, at the burning pyres and the piles

of cadavers that await their turn. I dare them to come and see the result of their righteous battle.'

'You sound confused, Vasusena,' Dussasan said. 'I hope your loyalties are clear.'

'Vathu, Dussasan!' Syoddhan finally spoke. 'Kinsman or not, the next one to question Vasusena's loyalty is a dead man.'

'I stand with Syoddhan,' Asvattama declared. 'The matter before us is one of strategy, not of loyalty and trust. In my opinion, the matter is also a simple one. We have, through the efforts and discipline of Vasusena, weapons fashioned by the Bhargava Angirasas themselves. It would be a pity to let these gifts, these astras sanctified by the great Bhargava Rama – the same Firewright, if you remember King Shalya, who once trained the Grandsire Bhisma in the use of astras – go to nought.'

Shalya said, 'What do you propose then?'

'In the proper hands, these weapons…'

Vasusena interrupted. 'Proper hands? Do you mean your hands, Asvattama? Is your lust for fame, for recognition as the greatest warrior, so strong that you…'

'Why you…' Asvattama bristled.

'Quiet, both of you!' Syoddhan commanded. He waited a while, considering both the men before him. He seemed to share silent words with Asvattama, after which he turned to Vasusena. 'Will you lead our armies, my friend? Now that Acharya Dron has fallen, will you command the men?'

'But…I…' Vasusena was pleased but equally taken aback. He glanced at Asvattama, who nodded in agreement. Drawing in the reassurance with a deep breath Vasusena said, 'Yes, Syoddhan. I will lead them. And I will bring you victory or die trying.'

Syoddhan clapped a proud hand on Vasusena's back. Then he turned to the others. 'As for the decision before us – on my head be it. On my head be it all, this bloodshed and death, these terrible deeds. Use your weapons as you best deem fit, Vasusena. For good or bad, history shall say it was I who began this war, not you, not anyone else. I see no point in trying to engage

Dharma or his brothers in a conversation anymore. If there is any hope for redemption, it lies in our victory. Give it all you've got.'

Vasusena felt his heart brim with affection and respect for the man he considered his dearest friend. It overshadowed the strains of hesitation he felt, and the possibilities of fraternal affection he had briefly entertained disappeared. He said, resolute, 'As you command, Your Highness. It shall be as you command. The strategy I propose is a simple one, not unlike what we have been doing all along. First, I will use astra-weapons to kill what measly divisions still remain in Dharma's service. Once that is done, and there is no more room for formations, no place for them to hide their leaders, including Dharma Yudhisthir, I shall hunt down those who remain, one by one.'

30

‘FIRST BHISMA, THEN DRON, NOW VASUSENA… IS THERE ANYONE in this damned war that you’ll deign to kill, Partha?’

More than the nature of the words, it was a surprise to all to hear them come from Dharma. True, his day had not gone well, and Vasusena had pushed them to the very edge of defeat. But for him to openly chide his brother this way was a chilling reminder of their precarious state.

Partha sighed, tired, but kept his temper. After sixteen days of bloodshed, he felt far too numb to respond to Dharma.

‘It isn’t easy to face Vasusena in a duel, Agraja,’ Bhim spoke up in his brother’s stead. ‘Imagine shooting at a moving mark, one that is in turn letting arrows loose upon you. Imagine further that this mark is exceptionally adept at anticipating your position, which makes defending yourself against it far more difficult.’

‘What are you trying to say, Bhim?’

‘That Vasusena is known as a good archer for a reason. The best of us can defend ourselves against him, but not defend against and attack him at the same time. By the time you have dealt with his shafts and let loose counter-arrows of your own, he has moved position. All this happens in the blink of an eye. I can’t explain it any better, but anyone who’s faced him knows what I mean…’

‘Everyone fails against Vasusena in exactly the same way, Agraja,’ Partha added. ‘By the time you can aim at Vasusena he’s already sent his arrows at you, usually more than one. His strategy makes him near-invincible. He gives his opponent no chance to attack him. I’m constantly on the defensive and…’

Dharma cut in, ‘And this is your excuse? Partha? Bhim? Puuya! You’re supposed to be great warriors, and here you are, telling me tales like children…Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? I am, to have you cowards for my brothers! Weren’t you there on the battlefield today, when he spat in my face, when he called out those despicable insults. And those weapons… First Asvattama had us grovelling in the mud like fools, and then Vasusena arrived to rub our faces in it today!’

‘Dharma…’ Dhaumya tried to intervene. His eyes were tired from attending to the innumerable men who lay in the infirmary tent, and his hands were bloody. ‘We’re all at the end of our tethers. Let it be…’

‘Let it be? Let what be, Acharya? Defeat? Dishonour?’

‘Dharma…’ This time it was Govinda who spoke.

‘What, Govinda? First him, now you… How easy it is for those who do not fight to offer advice. This is a battlefield, and the privilege to comment on battle must be earned with blood.’

‘And he has that privilege,’ Yuyudhana snapped. ‘As for Govinda not fighting – don’t worry, I’ve killed enough for the both of us, and then some.’

‘Vathu!’ Dharma snapped. ‘Stay out of this! All of you stay out of this! This is between me and my brother!’ He turned once again to Partha, and said, ‘My brother, the one I trusted the most, the one I’ve cherished as a son all these years. He goes out there, the so-called hero of Aryavarta, and makes a mockery of us! All you’re good for is womanizing! Muhira!’

‘At least,’ Partha growled, ‘I’m not a hypocrite. But you…? Every night, you lie in Panchali’s bed, sated and spent, while out there men are dying for you! Even now you speak to me bearing her perfume on your body, and I stand before you with the blood of soldiers on my hands. How dare you call me a coward! I’ve had enough of this nonsense. Find someone else to wage your war!’

With that, Partha threw down his weapons and stormed out of the tent. He paused as he walked past Panchali, and then, he was gone.

Dharma watched him go, his eyes narrowing with the silent conviction of one who believed himself to be right. At length, he said, ‘Well then, let’s

get down to it…'

'You need to call him back, Dharma,' Govinda softly ventured.

'What?'

'We need Partha. We need him because he is a great warrior and because, as you so rightly pointed out, everyone thinks he is a hero. Whether you admit it or not, the men need him to look up to.'

Dharma lost what little control he had left. 'We need him? We need him? No, we don't! I am Emperor here, not Partha Savyasachin! You're to blame for this display of his ego, Govinda! You've made him believe that he's indispensable. Well, you both are wrong!'

'Agraja…' Bhim began.

'Are you my brother, or not, Bhim?' Dharma said.

'Agraja, I…'

'Will you fight or not, without Partha?'

Bhim hesitated before answering, 'I'll do as you command, Agraja.'

'And you, my brothers?' Dharma turned to Nakul and Sadev. 'Will you fight?'

Both men nodded.

'And what about you, Commander?'

Dhrstyadymn said nothing, but glanced at Govinda.

'Oh, so it's come to that, has it?' Dharma shouted. 'Now you will defy me, will you, Govinda? What will you do, if I refuse to yield? Kill me and take all that you've wanted for your own? Come, Govinda; come Yuyudhana; come now, all at once. My brothers, kinsmen, friends…sate your thirst with my blood and let this torment be over, by Rudra!'

'Dharma, please…' Govinda's voice was unusually strained. He looked around at the angry faces and heaving chests, and made his decision. Walking up to Dharma, he slowly went down on his knees before the former emperor. With both hands, he clasped Dharma's feet and lowered his head to the ground in the most submissive and servile of postures.

Dharma was astounded, as was everyone else around them.

'I once called you my brother, remember?' Govinda said, his head still bowed. 'The day we first met, at Kampilya…? That day you embraced me

as you would Sadev and Nakul, and we all laughed, our hearts filled with hope for the future. I ask you now – no – I beg you, as your brother, forgive Partha his harsh words and call him back. We need him, Dharma.'

Dharma crossed his arms over his chest. 'Your words and actions have hardly been those of the obedient brother you now claim to be, Govinda.'

'Then, forgive me too, Your Highness. For all the loyalty I've shown you, for all the blood I've spilt for you, before Kurukshetra, forgive me and grant me this…'

Silence.

Yuyudhana glared from Govinda to Dharma, his jaws clenched tight with anger. Shikandin's grey-green eyes flashed in anger, and a vein throbbed at Pradymna's neck.

'All right,' Dharma said. 'I forgive you both. Now get up, Govinda. Bhim, go speak to Partha. Tell him I bear him no malice. It's been a long day for all of us, and not all that was said, was meant. Go, sleep now, all of you. Tomorrow I myself shall duel with Vasusena.'

It was a sign of how weary everyone was that no one thought to argue or protest. The gathering dispersed.

'Come on,' Yuyudhana gave Govinda a rough push, leading him out of the Command Tent. He did not speak again till the two of them had entered Govinda's lodgings, when he hissed, 'Is she really worth it, Govinda? Daruka,' he then called out to Govinda's captain. 'Come, serve your Commander, who returns from grovelling at his *Emperor's* feet… Dhik! Shame on you, Govinda!'

Govinda said, 'Neither Dharma nor his feet determine my self-esteem. I'm one amongst many who have bowed to him for no reason. It has never bothered you all these years! Our rulers make us just one promise, and we surrender to them our lives, our liberty and dignity, all that is ours simply under the assurance of being treated with justice. But we don't hold them to that promise, instead, we look the other way for as long as we can. Today you're angry because I was slighted. Where was this anger all these years, Yuyudhana? For too long now divinity and destiny have legitimized what

reason and compassion would not. An individual for a family, a family for the kingdom, a kingdom for an empire… And now – an empire for humanity. Of what consequence, then, is Govinda Shauri or the honour you think he's lost at Dharma's feet?'

Yuyudhana was unmoved. 'You know what, Govinda. It's true. I am a prince. I was born a prince and will die one. Unlike you, I don't have the stomach for all this equality prattle. Like it or not, we are Arya. Behave like one! Muhira!'

He walked around ranting, kicking at the odd object that lay in his way. 'All this for a woman…' he muttered. 'The *Emperor* we bleed for lies in her arms while you play the martyr… Hu!'

'Come now…' Govinda began, when a voice interrupted.

'He's right, you know.' Panchali walked into the tent, flashing an understanding glance at Yuyudhana. 'I've told you this before, Govinda. I'm not worth it.'

'Let me be the judge of that, Panchali.'

'It's too great a debt to bear.'

'It is I who is in your debt.' Govinda took her hands in his. 'I failed you when you needed me the most. I wasn't there when Dharma wagered you. I wasn't there to stop him, to stop Dussasan and Vasusena. Sometimes, I think I've failed you from the very first day I saw you…failed to protect what you've stood for.'

'And what day was that, Govinda?' Panchali said, her eyes holding a message that she did not put into words. She continued, 'You did what you knew was right. We both know there are more important things out there than you and I. And that has been the compelling force for all your actions. But what has happened to you now? Where is that dispassionate Govinda?'

'He died. You see, one day he found something that moved him to the core of his being… He died and was reborn, as he will a million times, in every age through all of Time.'

Panchali's tone turned playful as she turned to Yuyudhana and asked, 'How many women has he already used that line on? You should teach him some new ones…'

Unable to help himself, Yuyudhana grinned.

Shrugging, Panchali continued, ‘I don’t know what else to say, Govinda. I don’t know how else to convince you…You believe that humanity thrives on challenge and conflict, that we aren’t limited by our desires but by our abilities. Our hearts and minds are capable of dreaming of the gods themselves, though we may not walk among them… It’s a gift that you have. You’re able to look at people and see a living creature that changes and grows, not a mindless mob. You see humanity, not a teeming mass; you see oneness in us, the greater being that we are collectively. To this being millennia may be just moments, and yet you…’ She smiled, a mixture of embarrassment and disappointment, and said, ‘But I have nothing to give you in return, Govinda. Just as Aryavarta has nothing to give you in return. Years from now, what will be said about Govinda Shauri? You fight for the thankless… it is futile.’

Govinda’s eyes held contentment. ‘Aryavarta will give me exactly what you already have, Panchali. Of that I have no doubt. Now, for once, I agree with Dharma. We all ought to get some sleep…’

‘And Partha?’ Yuyudhana asked.

Govinda said, ‘Leave him to me.’

31

FOR A MOMENT, SYODDHAN THOUGHT HE WAS IN HIS ROOMS AT the palace of Hastina, on the bed he had shared for decades with his beloved wife. Indeed, he smiled, thinking that the hazy figure he saw through half-open eyes was the loving face he had longed to look upon since the war had begun seventeen days ago.

‘Sanjaya…’ Syoddhan fell back on to his bed with disappointment as the blurred form turned into a recognizable figure, but then sat up again as he caught the smell of imminent dawn on the night air. There was much to be done before the muster of their men, including deciding on their battle plans for their day.

‘Your Highness…’ Sanjaya bowed. ‘Your father sends you his blessings.’

‘Never mind my father. What brings you here?’ Syoddhan got out of his bed and moved around his tent with efficiency. An attendant brought him rose-fragranced water for his ablutions before helping him into his war attire.

‘Devala has returned. He brings a visitor. Vasusena waits for you in the Command Tent,’ Sanjaya reported.

‘And you came all the way from Hastina to tell me this?’

Sanjaya did not answer, but looked on with expressionless comity.

Syoddhan splashed water on to his face, dispelling the last traces of sleep, before saying. ‘Tell him I will be there shortly. As I suppose, you will too?’

‘If that is what you wish.’

Syoddhan paused, tempted to say what it was he wished for right then in the depth of his heart – that Sanjaya were dead, that they were all dead, and that this endless nightmare was over. But the moment passed. ‘Go…’ Syoddhan ordered. ‘You too,’ he added, turning to the attendant.

Alone, Syoddhan stared at the rose petals in the water, taking in their fragrance, their fragile beauty – qualities incongruous with the barren, bloodsoaked land of Kuru’s Fields. Then he raised his head and let the smell of war choke his senses.

‘Well, Vasusena?’ Syoddhan began without prelude as he walked into the Command Tent. He was too tired for formality or chatter. Victory was within their reach, as Vasusena had promised, but Syoddhan could not ignore the price they had paid for it. Of the ninety-nine brothers who had stood by his side, only Dussasan and two others remained alive. Syoddhan knew he trod on dangerous ground, that any time now Dussasan would lose the faith he had left in his brother, or worse, gain enough faith in himself to do the unthinkable. That, however, was a war he would wage in its own time. For now Syoddhan relied on Asvattama and his personal guard to keep him safe, and found the will to go on, day after day, by becoming one with the conflict at hand. Of course, he drew consolation from the fact that, as far as wars went, Dharma had suffered worse losses than he had.

With a weary sigh, Syoddhan began strapping on the armour that Dron had given him less than a week ago, wondering if truly such few days had passed. It felt like a lifetime, a lifetime in which emotion had risen and ebbed, reason had stood paramount at times and at others been lost in darkness. And now Devala Asita, in whom he and the others had placed their confidence, had returned.

‘Well…?’ he repeated, looking up.

‘I’ve verified it with Asvattama here,’ Vasusena replied, gesturing to the tall warrior who stood leaning gracefully against a tentpole.

‘And what do you think?’

Asvattama turned over the signet ring that he held. It was shaped as a coiled snake with seven hoods, each one set with coloured jewels for fiery

eyes. ‘It’s the signet ring of the Naga kings, no doubt. This is their royal crest.’

Syoddhan took the ring from Asvattama and studied it. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘let’s meet this messenger Devala has brought back.’

Sanjaya admitted the visitor into the tent along with a tired and travel-weary Devala. The visitor was a tall man with a thick, scraggly beard, dressed in the robes and beads of an ascetic. Dirty, matted hair fell over his eyes, obscuring his face. Syoddhan took in the obvious scars on the man’s hands and flashed a look at his uncovered feet. The faint but perceptible mark left by tough hide sandals on the little toe was enough to show that this was simply a disguise. ‘You bring a message from King Takshaka?’ he asked.

The man nodded in response.

‘You’re amongst friends now,’ Syoddhan said as he walked over and smiled his reassurance. He could tell by the way the man held his gaze that he was no petty spy or hired scout. This was a warrior, possibly one of the Naga princes or nobles. ‘Won’t you trust us and reveal your identity?’

‘Haven’t you guessed it already?’

Even as the gathered warriors tried to place the voice, the man reached into his matted hair to undo the thin string that held the scraggly false beard in place over a neatly maintained one. Vasusena gasped audibly, while Asvattama muttered under his breath.

Syoddhan, however, was less astonished. ‘King Takshaka,’ he formally greeted the man. ‘I regret that our meeting had to take place this way and under these circumstances. I’m ill-placed to welcome you as you deserve.’

The Naga king inclined his head in greeting. He made his apologies for the ruse, but the surprise he had caused most of them was still apparent. Syoddhan spoke casually, dissolving the tension. ‘Come, sit down,’ he said, leading Takshaka over to a seat of honour on his right. ‘Well, then…’

‘My son Brihadbala has already died for you,’ Takshaka began. ‘With him have died many of our people – the Naga and Nishada tribes of the various forests.’

Syoddhan nodded.

Takshaka shifted. ‘I am all that is left. And when Devala came to me, when he found me despite my attempts to retreat from all Aryavarta with nothing but my sorrow for company…well, I realized I had once last chance to redeem my honour and the honour of my ancestors. I am here to offer you my service.’

‘Why?’ Syoddhan was gentle.

‘He killed my son,’ Takshaka said, his voice tremulous. ‘He killed Aswasena. I don’t care what justifications he gives – he killed my son. That is why I am here.’

‘You wish to avenge your son’s death? You wish to kill Govinda Shauri?’ Syoddhan was taken aback. ‘There is a war going on out there, and all you care about is the death of one man? Is that why you sent Brihadbala to fight for us? Is your anger worth the lives of so many?’

‘Did you have a better reason? What is it that you sacrifice the lives of thousands for?’ Takshaka retorted. His eyes flashed with anger, but the moment passed. ‘Syoddhan, I’m an old man and you, and your friends here, are all young enough to be my sons. I shall presume on the privilege of age to speak from the heart.’

‘Please do.’

‘You are no better than Govinda Shauri. Your grandfather and father left us to rot inside Kandava, not caring whether we perished in floods or died of disease. You kept us out of sight, though we lived within your lands – it was more expedient for you to ignore us than claim us as subjects for we had little to offer you. When war came to you, however, you did not hesitate to reach out to us.’

Asvattama bristled. ‘And what has changed since? First you sent us Brihadbala and your men. Now you have graced us with your presence. How have we suddenly redeemed ourselves in your eyes?’

‘Ah, Acharya. You and your kinsmen have a special place in our hearts. The story of our families goes back years.’

‘Then you are here for the sake of old friendships?’

‘Yes and no.’ Clearing his throat, Takshaka continued. ‘Nearly forty years ago, on a stormy monsoon night, my father ordered me and my fellow

soldiers to escort a man he wouldn't name on a journey from Mathura to a village across the river. I met that man just outside the gates of Mathura's palace. He held a bundle in his arms. I did not ask what was inside; nor did he offer to tell me. It struck me of no consequence until we reached the banks of the river. Kans, King of Mathura, had an entire division of his men waiting to attack us…'

Vasusena drew in a sharp breath, making Takshaka smile. He said, 'Yes, you can guess what that little bundle was now, can't you…? I first set eyes on Govinda Shauri when he was but a newborn, hardly muhurttas old. I defended him with the lives of my men that night, and I swore never to reveal who he was as long as Kans lived. I tell you this, not to show what he owes me but to make you see what I've been driven to. You see, we found the courage to save Govinda Shauri against those odds because we believed that he could defy tyranny. When he killed Kans, we hailed him as our redeemer. It took me years to see that Govinda Shauri does not act for anything but his self-interest. The same man who set us free to claim his legacy as Prince of Mathura came to barter, cajole and convince us to forsake our home, our freedom and self-respect, in order to install Dharma Yudhisthir on the throne. But neither of these betrayals compares to the one that drives my need for vengeance. It's not just my son I seek to avenge, but a dear friend, one who made it possible for us to survive all those years in Kandava… Now do you see, Acharya?'

Asvattama nodded. Syoddhan did not speak, but saw Sanjaya open and close his mouth as though he had thought to say something but changed his mind.

Tears of anger brimmed in Takshaka's red eyes. 'Govinda Shauri, the destroyer of the evil Firewrights. Govinda betrayed and abandoned the Wrights. Hah! Agniveshya Angirasa was my friend,' he confessed, through clenched teeth. 'He asked for my help. It's true that for many years, Agniveshya stayed in Kandava and that we learnt much from him. The Wrights have paid for trusting that bastard Govinda; they've paid with their lives! In the name of the friendship I owe them, I swear by the thousand heads of the great snake Sesha, I offer you my complete loyalty, Syoddhan.

Whatever we have left from the Wrights, I shall gladly share with you. Use it to bring down the man who brought them down.'

'Hu!' Vasusena snorted in contempt. Malice and derision gleamed in his eyes. 'And what can you do for us now? You bring us no men – we know that you have come alone. You have nothing to offer us… He slowly added, as Takshaka glared at him, 'Your Highness…'

Takshaka said, 'There is a weapon…' He paused purposefully as everyone turned to him with renewed interest. 'Agniveshya Angirasa created it by our flesh and blood, which is why he called it the Nagaastra. It is yours, with the blessings of Indra himself.'

'And you know how to make it?' Asvattama asked. His expression remained neutral but his eyes blazed with an eagerness that bordered on lust.

'No, I don't know how it's made. But I still have some of what was once made…to share with you.'

'And the antidote? No Wright would have made a poison without making its antidote!'

In response, Takshaka took a vial out of his waistband and let it drop. The vial shattered on the ground, its contents spraying in all directions. Sanjaya let out a muted yell, Dussasan leapt back, and Vasusena flinched. Syoddhan and Asvattama alone stood as they were, uncaring of the splatters they felt on their skin and robes. 'There,' Takshaka said. 'The only antidote is now lost. There is no counter to the poison, nor is there any other way of preventing its effects.'

'You are sure that no more exists – of the toxin or the antidote?' Asvattama asked.

Devala interjected, 'What is it, Your Highness? Are you jealous that after all these years of your searching, of torturing every Wright you could lay your hands on, it is I who have brought us the Nagaastra and not you?'

'On the contrary, Devala. If you remember, you were busy looking for snake-venom. It was I who pointed you in Takshaka's direction.'

Takshaka said, 'Then you answer your own question, Acharya. If you have looked and the poison or its antidote was not found, surely there is

none left.' He turned to Vasusena. 'There is enough poison here to turn a simple arrow into an infallible astra. All we need is an unerring marksman. Kill Partha. None of them will fight on after that. I'll leave it to you to decide whether to take Dharma dead or alive. Either way, victory is yours.'

Asvattama frowned but said nothing more.

Vasusena did not notice. Nevertheless, he protested, 'It's not that easy… You forget who drives Partha's chariot-rig… I need someone as skilled with horses as Govinda.'

'King Shalya of Madra will do it,' Syoddhan said. 'Like his nephews Nakul and Sadev, Shalya has an uncanny knack for dealing with animals. The people of Madra are excellent horsemasters, their king not the least of them.'

'Shalya? But…'

'He gave me his word of honour as an Arya to fight for us, heart and soul. He has, without doubt, kept his word. I trust him completely. Shalya will be your charioteer today.'

Vasusena punched his fist into the palm of his other hand. 'Now you begin to make sense. Well then! What are we waiting for? Let us crush them! Today, we shall end this war.'

He strode out of the tent, his left arm around Dussasan's shoulder, in conversation with Takshaka on his right. Syoddhan watched them leave and then followed, signalling to Asvattama to join him.

'You need a bath,' Sanjaya began turning to his sole companion in the tent now. He did nothing to hide the amusement he felt at Devala's condition. 'And a shave. Two, actually…' he said, referring not only to the stubble that covered Devala's chin but also his usually smooth pate.

'I need news. I need good news,' Devala growled. 'I need to know what is going on. I had to bite my tongue every time one of those idiots spoke for fear of saying that which I ought not to say.'

'Ah yes, I wondered why you were so quiet. As for news: Well, the sun will rise today on the seventeenth day of battle and…'

Devala interrupted, ‘I can see for myself how the battle goes, Sanjaya, but I need to know if *our* plan is still in place.’

‘What plan do you mean, Devala? The one you, Suka and I crafted? Or the one you and I have held close to our hearts from long before that Varuni and his ambitions were known to us?’

‘You don’t mean…?’

‘I once told you that the Firstborn shall pay a thousand times over for what they have done to us, to our kind. I stand by that. Sukadeva Vasishta Varuni is but a means to an end. He thinks he can use us to his gain, but the truth remains that we have used him to ours. This war demonstrates beyond doubt the living might of the Firewrights, of our craft. And now that these foolish kings have spent what little they have hoarded of it, who will protect them from foreign invaders or even rebels from within? What means do they have to preserve their hierarchy? They need us, not the Firstborn. See how they drool and squabble over this Naga weapon, like a pack of rabid dogs. Imagine, Devala, we shall be their masters, feeding them scraps of meat to tame them to our will. We shall rule, and on our terms!’

Devala’s weary air fell away and he stood up straighter. ‘What would you have me do now?’

Sanjaya smiled. ‘When this war ends, and it soon will, the legacy of the Firstborn must end with it. You, my friend, shall make sure of that.’

‘Of course…but…what if…’

‘What if what?’

‘What if, Sanjaya, just what if Dharma’s forces win? What if Govinda Shauri wins?’

Sanjaya laughed, the sound filling the tent. ‘My, my Devala,’ he said. ‘I never knew you for a jester. Dharma…and win?’ His voice turning to a menacing rasp, he added, ‘Nothing can save them now. Absolutely nothing.’

32

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR, IT occurred to Dharma Yudhisthir how few of his people were alive. Against the vastness of Kuru's fields, the armies that remained standing were pitifully small. Horses and elephants were seen in ones and twos, as though let out to pasture. Foot soldiers crouched and clustered in small groups, driven to near-madness by sixteen days of war and the omnipresent stench of death. Each step taken by man or an animal on the field fell on squelching flesh, spraying offal and entrails in the air, and sending feasting carrion crows and engorged vultures squawking to find another meal a hair's breadth away. Here and there, cries of agony from the living and on occasion from those not-as-yet dead cut through the clamour of battle – for, yes, the fighting went on.

Dharma knew it was far from over, for those who were now left behind had everything to gain and nothing to lose, and he reminded himself of that over and over as he led what remained of his division to face Vasusena. This time, no one dissuaded him, nor did they converge to his protection, simply because they could not. Dhrstyadymn and Shikandin were desperately trying to hold their own against Kripa and Kritavarman respectively. Partha and Govinda tried to rally their men against Asvattama, but soon realized that there were few men left to rally. Battle was now a sentient monster with a mind of its own and countless arms. Strategy and formation had no value; weapons were thrown and cast without thought. Once in a while, some vassal prince or lord would use his few astra-weapons in the hope of buying glory with the blood of others. Eventually, though, he would stand defenceless and alone till some common soldier or cavalryman hacked him down like he was one of them. Against the vast

spread of death and destruction, Kuru's Fields seemed small, and smaller still for the one man who dominated the landscape, wreaking vengeance and wringing victory from the jaws of defeat: Vasusena.

There was, Dharma mused, something familiar about Vasusena, something that he had not noticed all these years – not till this war. It may have been the way Vasusena had aged, or simply the way he fought, but it stirred a memory, one that Dharma could not identify but found pleasant, as though the man reminded him of a friend or a loved one. Dharma dismissed the notion, blaming it on the stress of the moment. After all, he mulled, what else but war could bring two men, especially enemies, closer? The self-indulgent musing cost him dearly. He did not hear the warning shout Yuyudhana sent his way, nor did his horseman react quickly enough. Rather than feeling the explosion, Dharma heard and saw it for he was instantly thrown into the air. He landed, fortunately or otherwise, on the pulpy remains of an elephant that had fallen four days ago, the animal's skin rent open by scavengers to serve as a cushion of entrails and flesh. His charioteer was not so lucky – the man lost his life impaled against the broken axle of his own rig.

Dharma stared, dazed, but the state gave way to a mix of gratitude and anger. He realized he was still holding on to his bow, and his quiver of arrows remained strapped on. He stood up, wading his way out of the elephant's belly to stand on hard ground, dripping blood like a demon from Patala.

The sight was enough to make any man quail, but Vasusena was not just any man. He smiled, amused at Dharma's appearance, and raised his bow. It may have been the need to prove himself a warrior like any other on the field, or simply the resentment of having been protected and kept back by the others through the war, but suddenly Dharma felt no fear, only the thrill of battle. Letting out a hoarse roar, he whipped out an arrow from his quiver, set it to his bow, and sent it in Vasusena's direction. Then, without waiting, he ran to where a long spear had pinned a horse and its rider to the earth and, pulling the weapon out, hurled it at his enemy.

Vasusena countered Dharma's arrow with his own, while Shalya expertly guided the horses and the rig to avoid the spear. Some of the soldiers in their division ran up to confront Dharma, but Vasusena ordered them back.

Drawing three arrows from his quiver, Dharma set them all together to his bow. He knew he was hardly a marksman of Partha's mettle, but that did not mean he was without any talent. A voice at the back of his mind reminded him that his opponent lacked neither skill nor a supply of Wright-weapons. Indeed, Vasusena countered Dharma's arrows with a single shaft of his own, one that split into five pieces – a single arrow and four spiralling strips of metal that hurtled through the air, whip-like, to wrap themselves around two of Dharma's shafts.

The third of Dharma's shafts brought Vasusena's arrow down. One of the two spirals, however, found its mark, swiping the side of Dharma's chest to land on the ground behind him, splitting his flesh open in a vicious tear. His scream carried over the ground, and he doubled over, falling to the ground.

A sense of freedom from guilt and responsibility collided in his mind with the unbearable burden of failure, culminating in the hope that his mind-war too would end with Vasusena's next arrow. But as the anticipated dart sped through the air, Dharma heard, first the sharp crack of metal on metal followed by Bhim's leonine battle-cry. After that all went dark.

'Get up, Agraja!'

Dharma knew the voice and its tone well – he knew it well from the day his father Pandu had died. Old enough to shoulder responsibility and young enough to feel a child's pain, Dharma had tried to find comfort in solitude and the promise of a life of simplicity. They – his father, his brothers and both his mothers Pritha and Madri – had been exiles, living a serene life in the forests, when his father's death had changed things completely. That day, Dharma had felt the first pangs of fear. That day he had also found in one of his brothers the ability to be his constant strength.

'Bhim…?' Dharma opened his eyes to see his brother standing over him. The man before him appeared older, stronger than the youth who had

pulled him out of solitude, given him the courage to face his destiny as a prince. ‘Bhim…’ he repeated.

Relief flickered across Bhim’s face, and then he turned away, whirling his huge, heavy mace above his head as though it were just a wooden staff. The weapon made short work of the host of arrows that rained down on him and Dharma. Then, taking careful aim, Bhim swung hard, deflecting a spiked astra weapon from Vausena’s bow back towards the men who accompanied his enemy. Acting on his brief advantage, Bhim picked up Dharma’s bow and quiver and sent a number of arrows in Vasusena’s direction. He then swung the bow onto one shoulder and used his arms to hoist the incapacitated Dharma on to the other. Picking up his mace again, Bhim began to run.

Slowly, Dharma became aware of his surroundings. Soldiers, Vasusena’s men by their insignia of a golden elephant-rope, lay dead around them. Their death, he knew, had been gory and instantaneous, for Bhim had smashed their skulls in with his mace. He could not comprehend the bravery and skill his brother had demonstrated in doing combat with so many men at once while fending off Vasusena’s arrows.

‘Bhim! Over here!’ Dharma strained to look up as he heard a voice. He saw Nakul driving his own rig towards them at great speed. Behind him were Partha and Govinda. Both vehicles came to a stop close to Bhim, who placed Dharma down on Nakul’s rig and clambered on himself.

‘Quick, get him back to camp. Partha and I will make sure you are not followed.’

Dharma recognized the voice as Govinda’s and tried his best to meet the man’s gaze. ‘Forgive me,’ he said. ‘Forgive me for all my earlier doubts, my harsh words. Forgive me for doubting everyone’s effort. Vasusena is… unstoppable. Short of a concerted attack by all of us, I can’t think of a way to defeat him…’

Govinda simply said, ‘Fall back, Dharma. Remember: if we lose you, then all is lost.’

‘Perhaps all is lost, anyway,’ Nakul muttered, sullen, as he drove away across the field, Bhim and Dharma with him.

‘A concerted attack is not… it’s against the rules of war,’ Partha said to Govinda as they stood watching Nakul leave with Bhim and the wounded Dharma.

‘Have we really followed the rules that you begin to bother about them now? I can’t think of a single rule of war that has not been breached since the day the Grandsire fell. And I can’t remember a single rule of peacetime morality that was upheld when he was alive. I suppose he – and Dharma – would both argue that morality is a subtle thing…’

Partha grunted with the effort of shooting three arrows in succession at a rogue elephant that was wandering about, injured and in agony. He watched with a grimace as the animal fell, and its suffering ended. ‘A battlefield may be the wrong place for such questions, but it gives rise to them like no other. I have to ask, Govinda: If we do not try to defend and preserve the past, if morality is mutable, what then do we fight for? What is worth preserving?’

Govinda laughed, to the surprise of a passing enemy soldier. The standing man was soon left behind by their speeding rig but his distraction cost the soldier his life as one of Dharma’s soldiers attacked him from behind.

‘Rules of war!’ Govinda grunted, disdainful. ‘As to what is worth preserving, didn’t I explain that once already? Don’t make me go through that all over again, Partha. I can hardly remember what I said.’

‘I only know what you’ve taught me, my friend,’ Partha said, ‘and that is to be honest and true to myself – to do what I must, what I will.’

’That about sums it up, I think,’ Govinda said. ‘So what would you like to do today, Your Highness?’

Partha slapped a friendly hand on Govinda’s back. ‘Let us face Vasusena as men and warriors should.’

‘If that is what you want, then there is a way to do this…’ Govinda said. His voice mellowed as he added, ‘Do you trust me, Partha?’

Partha made to protest the question, but then decided against it. ‘Yes, Govinda,’ he simply stated.

‘Then here is how you defeat Vasusena: Stand firm. Just let your arrows loose without moving, without flinching. Aim your shafts at the same point,

in quick succession. He'll expect you to move, he'll expect you to think he'll move, and he will use that moment to release an astra weapon. Don't move. Stand firm, just as he does.'

'Is that all?' Partha asked, beaming. He knew what it was that Govinda was not saying in words. The way to kill Vasusena was to die. Hopefully, Partha would live just long enough to finish the task first. 'Find him, Govinda. And I will kill him.'

Govinda responded with a shouted word of command, at which Balahak and Sugriv leapt forward, leading them into battle.

They wasted no time on dealing with adversaries on the way; instead, Govinda cut through the now-rejuvenated enemy line. He did not have to go far: Spurred on by his victory against Dharma, Vasusena was set on decimating all that was left of Dharma's force and bringing an end to the war.

Partha immediately began to engage his opponent, sending a warning shaft into the air to begin with. Curiously, he felt no fear, just a wonderful, light-hearted tranquility. He had no doubt that there was only one way this encounter would end. In death, he would prove that he was Govinda's most faithful friend. He sent a flurry of simple shafts, made of the same, supple metal as the Gandiva bow, cloaking Vasusena in a shower of metal. But even as he pulled the bowstring in repeated rhythm, he heard a single, loud twang from Vasusena's bow.

The sound told Partha that it was not a common arrow, but a different kind of dart. A Firewright dart, probably poisoned. He waited. It was hardly an instant, but felt much longer. One arrow. An archer of Vasusena's calibre needed no more. His aim was unerring, and with Partha's position fixed there was no chance of him missing. All Partha hoped was that his death would be quick and clean.

Closing his eyes, Partha let his mind wander to pleasant memories. He watched himself laughing as he and Govinda splashed in the cool waters of the Yamuna and flirted with the pretty village maidens who came to let their calves drink from the river. He could feel the breeze on his face as the two of them raced up the hills near Dwaraka, shouting and yelling like children.

He watched himself fall asleep as Govinda sat nearby, staring at the sea beyond. Something told him death would feel like falling asleep, once again.

He heard Govinda's voice as a whisper, very close by, 'Those were good days, my friend.' Then he heard the soft thud of arrow piercing flesh. But Partha felt nothing.

It all happened very quickly after that.

There was a burst of noise: cries, cheers and howls all mixed together in brutal cacophony. Partha opened his eyes. 'No!' he screamed, frantic, as Govinda fell back under the impact of Vasusena's arrow, into his arms. Gently, he lowered Govinda onto the floor of the rig, resting the injured man's head on his knee. 'Yabha! How could you do this! I was ready to die; why did you have to be such a hero! You fool!'

Vasusena's arrow, a spiralling snake-like dart, was wedged deep in Govinda's chest. Already, the flesh around the wound had begun to turn black from the poison in the arrow. For a short while, Partha stared, open-mouthed, at the fallen Govinda. Then, letting his friend's listless body drop to the floor of the rig, he stood up. Veins throbbing, head thrown back, Partha let out a guttural cry that brought everyone around them to a halt. With a fury unseen in him before, he picked up his bow. His eyes were red yet cold as he reached into the depths of the rig for a bundle he knew all along Govinda had kept there and tugged it towards him.

'Wait…' Govinda's voice sounded distant. But Partha was not listening. His heart filled with unbearable hatred, he undid the bundle to reveal the bright gleam of Wright-metal.

Vasusena watched Partha's arrow as it curved in, trying to identify it by its shape. By the time he did, and launched shafts of his own to counter it, it was too late.

'Move!' He pushed Shalya aside, and the arrow sank into the wood of the rig, between them. Unfortunately, he realized, it had done its damage. Shalya stared at him, wide-eyed, his expression a mixture of incomprehension and fear. Vasusena understood at once. He quickly went

down on his knee next to Shalya and, tearing a strip of cloth from the edge of his robe, tied it tight around the older man's upper arm, cutting off the blood flow to and from the limb that Partha's arrow had grazed. He waited, praying he had been swift enough.

Moments passed, and so did the glaze in Shalya's eyes. He came to his senses with a great gasp of air as though he had forgotten to breathe in the interim. 'Was that…?' he asked Vasusena, taking in the wound on his arm as well the Wright-arrow still lodged in the wood of their rig.

'Yes. The Bramha-weapon.'

At that, Shalya appeared more horrified than he had been under the toxin's influence. 'Partha? Partha let loose the Bramha-astra?'

'Why does that astonish you?'

Shalya said, 'You're right, it ought not to.' Disappointment clouded his eyes, and he grit his teeth in anger as he said, 'As for Partha – I give you my word now, Vasusena. If you fall in combat today, I will carry on in your stead. I will fight till either he and his cowherd friend are dead, or else I am.'

'And here I thought,' Vasusena said, 'that you'd dissuade me all you could, Your Highness. I was wrong. You are a man of honour.'

'And I have no intentions of being a dead man of honour!' Shalya declared with sudden vehemence, as he took his position at the reins and urged the horses into action again.

'Your Highness…' Vasusena began, sounding concerned.

Shalya would have none of it. 'There,' he said, gesturing to their enemy. 'Partha is at a disadvantage. Govinda is down. This is your chance, Vasusena, finish him off!'

Snarling with glee at the prospect, Vasusena picked up a Wright-metal arrow of his own. 'Let's see,' he said, 'how Partha likes the feel of the Bramha-weapon himself.'

33

SYODDHAN BRISTLED AT THE FEEL OF BLOOD- AND SWEAT-STAINED fingers against his skin. Few had the courage to assume excessive familiarity with him, and to grab his wrist on impulse, as one might grab the wrist of an errant child or a bashful beloved, was more than excessive or familiar; it was downright offensive. Even Gandhari would not presume to so behave with her son. His mouth forming the beginning of a snarl, Syoddhan turned to the transgressor, but something in the man's eyes tugged at his heart. He had never seen anxiety or fear in Asvattama Bharadvaja.

'What is it?' he asked, while Dussasan held his breath at the scene, waiting for Asvattama to receive the expected reprimand from his brother.

'I've never said this before, and I shall not say it again,' Asvattama began, his fingers still wrapped in a tight grip around Syoddhan's arm. 'Make peace with Dharma, Syoddhan. Now. Stop this war.'

'What…? But why?'

Asvattama ignored the general rustle of discomfort and consternation his words had caused and kept his gaze on Syoddhan alone. 'Because each moment from here on threatens to destroy us, destroy our way of life. What we fight for will become meaningless, if there is none left alive in this realm. Vasusena had his one chance with the Naga-astra. For better or worse, Govinda is fatally hurt, probably dead. I dare not wonder what weapons Govinda had kept secret, but clearly he is in no position to stop Partha from using them. If we don't end this right now…'

'You'd have me make peace?' Syoddhan exclaimed. 'Now? When we stand on the brink of victory?'

'And what price will you pay for your victory?'

Syoddhan turned to face Asvattama. He flexed his arm, the bulging of mighty muscle forcing Asvattama to loosen his grip, and then to let go completely. ‘Why now, Asvattama?’ he asked, his tone holding more questions in addition to the one stated. ‘Not once before have you dissuaded me in such categorical terms. Why now?’

‘Syoddhan, I…’ Asvattama began to explain. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the flash of Vasusena’s Bramha-weapon as it sped, unerring, towards Partha. Breathing out hard, he declared. ‘It’s all right, my friend. It is too late. But whatever comes next, I will stand with you to the end of all things. Now, I think this might be a duel worth watching. Shall we move in?’

Before a confused Syoddhan could reply, Asvattama signalled to his rig-driver to move towards the site of the battle. Frowning, Syoddhan followed.

Partha felt the tip of Vasusena’s arrow pierce the skin of his chest, but he neither shrank back nor let his mind feel the pain. The toxin of the Bramha-weapon surged through him, inviting him into the depths of darkness. He followed, as he had been taught to, turning the fear into anger and thus into strength. When demons and other unspeakable creatures rushed at him from the recesses of his imagination, he embraced them, turning their might into his own. Laughing, gnashing his teeth, he reached out for another arrow from Govinda’s arsenal. Recognizing it as a flint-tipped arrow though constructed for a more devastating purpose, he struck the arrowhead on to the side of the rig, igniting a spark. He quickly set the arrow to the Gandiva, and let the shaft fly. Partha found sudden delight in the cast of awe on Vasusena’s face, for clearly the latter did not know the exact workings of the weapon. Nor did Partha, and he watched as his arrow wound its way towards Vasusena, and flared up into a huge flaming brand just as it descended towards him. With a shout of effort, Vasusena brought up his shield, fanning away the flames. At the same time, Shalya swerved, moving the rig out of the astra’s path.

Partha laughed again at the sight, the prospect of death, his own or his enemy’s, stirring strange sensations through his toxin-spurred trance. A

pleasant shiver ran through his body, a feeling not unlike the secret pleasures from a courtesan's touch. He yelled, head thrown back, a terrible, blissful cry that made the bravest of carrion-eating vultures squawk and flutter their wings.

Vasusena remained unaffected. Not to be outdone, he picked up a shaft shaped like a lightning-bolt, the weapon, they said, of Indra himself. This time, Partha could not predict the erratic path the unfamiliar weapon drew as it hurtled through the air. Only at the last instant did he see where and how it would strike. He tried to dodge as best as he could, turning sideways to allow the astra to strike him flat on the back, where his armour was thick and strong. The move served to protect him from earning a blood wound, but he was thrown back by the force of the impact. It didn't take him long to get to his feet and in a last, desperate attempt, he set a bunch of arrows to the string and released them. Then he toppled over the side of the rig and on to the ground, and the Gandiva was knocked out of his hand.

Partha did not remain down for long; he dragged himself to his feet, spitting mud and dust. He searched around for the Gandiva, and had just recovered it when he heard his name being called.

'Partha….'

The voice was a feeble groan in the distance, but it held a familiarity, a warmth that brought Partha out of his toxin-induced bloodlust. Eyes bulging, he looked around him, as though seeing for the first time all that had just transpired, as though the man who had fought in his body had been someone else. In the distance, battle continued, but around him the field was empty and silent. Sensing something amiss, Partha turned to the enemy he had fought all the while.

Vasusena was staggering, unable to stand steady on his rig. A hand clutched at an arrow, one of many that had pierced his abdomen, and blood dribbled out the side of his mouth. Partha's arrows had also cracked the axle of Vasusena's chariot-rig. One of the wheels had become lopsided, with shafts caught in the splintered wood. Shalya was just getting to his feet next to the rig, dazed and disoriented from having been thrown out of it.

Seeing Partha look in his direction, Vasusena held up a hand to gesture restraint and, placing his bow down, descended to pull out the arrows and set right his vehicle.

Still breathing hard, Partha let his arms drop to his sides.

‘Partha!’ The familiar voice sounded again in his ears, this time closer, stronger despite the pain it still held.

‘Govinda! I thought…I thought you were…’

‘What’s wrong…with you, Partha?’ Govinda said, gasping for breath. ‘Kill…kill him! What are you waiting for?’

‘Kill him?’ Partha repeated, confused. ‘But that’s not right, Govinda – Vasusena’s asked for reprieve…’

Govinda opened his eyes. They shone dark and fiery. ‘Panchali asked for justice,’ he said, his voice filled with quiet strength. ‘Your son, Abhimanyu, asked for fairness. Hidimbya and so many others like him have spent their entire lives asking for equality.’

‘But it wasn’t Vasusena who denied them justice and equality.’

‘No,’ Govinda admitted, ‘But he remained silent while it happened, and that is guilt enough. Kill him, Partha,’ he ordered.

‘Govinda…’

‘Now.’

Partha gazed deep into Govinda eyes. Finding what he needed in their depths, he nodded and raised his bow. He reached out, without looking, for an arrow, and smiled when his hands closed in on a dark, gleaming shaft, its head made up of curved prongs, like hands folding together in salutation. Anjalika, the shape was called, and Partha had seen it used before by Bhisma, crafted out of stinging Wright-metal; he had seen Purbaya Hidimbya and Sthuna of the Eastern Forests set it to their bowstrings, but then it had been the dull, dark metal of Kali. The one he now held was the same, yet different – made of Kali but finished to the precision and lightness of Wright-metal, filled with a muted blaze of its own like the black depths of a raging fire. This, Partha realized, was why Govinda had started on this long journey when he had been but a cowherd-turned-prince, begun this story that they stood within, all those years ago: He had seen the

future, and the future had held death and destruction. Now, it was time for the tale to end.

Partha placed the anjalika-arrow to his bowstring and carefully took aim. Unhurried, unperturbed, he drew the string back. The arrow, it seemed to him, left his fingers with a life of its own.

‘Get him! I want that murderer! Now!’

Partha started at the sound of Syoddhan’s voice. Already, Kritavarman and Kripa were charging at him in response to Syoddhan’s command, and a host of other men followed close behind. He glanced back in the direction of Vasusena’s broken rig, where Shalya stood holding the warrior’s severed head, staring at it with a reverence Partha could not comprehend. He instinctively made to go towards the Madra king to speak some words of explanation, though he did not know what he would say. But there was no time.

‘For Agniveshya!’ A man Partha took a few moments to recognize as Takshaka charged at him with a blood-curdling cry, while Kritavarman and Kripa both notched arrows to their bows.

Even as Partha readied to take on the attackers all at once, Govinda pulled himself to his feet, his bloody hands leaving red smears on the sides of the rig. He took up the reins, wincing as he tried to see clearly, to find the strength to guide the horse.

‘Don’t even think about it!’ A voice warned him and an arrow sped through the air to bring down the charging Naga King.

‘Get out of here,’ another voice said. ‘Get back to camp!’

Govinda meekly complied as Yuyudhana and Shikandin drew up alongside. Leaving them to deal with Kripa and the others, he turned his horses around with a word of command. A flick of the reins, and they were off at a gallop.

‘Are you mad?’ Partha shouted. ‘Let go at once! Let me take the reins. You’ve got to get the arrow out!’

With a weary look at his friend, Govinda slowed the horses down to a canter but held on to the reins with one hand. With his other hand he tugged

hard at Vasusena's poisoned arrow. It did not budge, but the searing pain it caused brought with it a curtain of darkness. Govinda fell forward.

Partha caught him just as he doubled over and took over the reins from him. 'Pradymna!' he shouted out, vaguely aware that the warrior was somewhere nearby. 'Prad…oh thank Rudra!'

'It's all right. I've got the horses,' the younger man climbed on to the rig, trying to not quail at the sight of his prone father.

'We need to be quick…' Pradymna urged the horses on as fast as they could go as Partha, with renewed fury, let his arrows loose on all those who came in their way. Blood trickled out of Govinda's mouth, pooling on the floor of the small rig and collecting, warm and viscous, against their toes.

34

BY THE TIME PARTHA AND PRADYMNA HAD GOT GOVINDA BACK TO camp, the warrior had begun to retch and cough up blood in copious amounts. Ashen-faced, their bodies and robes stained red, the two men carried the warrior into the medic's tent, shouting for Dhaumya.

Panchali, who was tending to a now-revived Dharma, took one glance at Govinda and turned away. 'Who?' she asked, her voice cracking with the strain.

Pradymna replied, 'Vasusena. He's dead. Takshaka was there too.'

Dharma started to sit up, his face bright with sudden exhilaration, but Partha glared at him as though daring him to say a word. He turned back to Panchali. Although she seemed outwardly composed, Partha saw what she held in her eyes. The day of the dice game, the day Jayadrath and his sons had tried to ravage her, the day Keechak of Matsya had assaulted her – not even then had she shown such fear. It made Partha want to kill Vasusena all over again.

Dhaumya rushed in as the two men laid Govinda down on a tress. Shikandin and Yuyudhana were right behind him. 'Hold on, Govinda! Hold on!' Shikandin urged.

Dhaumya barked out instructions and came to kneel beside Govinda. It was Panchali who complied with the directions. She began stirring up a poultice with crisp efficiency, while Dhaumya assessed the injury by pressing on the flesh around it.

'Ahhh!' Govinda cried out in pain. 'Not…not dead yet!'

Relief washed over them all, enough to make Shikandin find his tongue. 'And I am not some comely maiden to be wooed, so stop pretending that

you are!’

Govinda opened his eyes, wincing again as Dhaumya continued to examine him.

‘All right,’ Dhaumya gestured to Pradymna and Shikandin. ‘You two had better hold him down. I’ve got to get the arrow out; it’s wedged deep in his flesh. I can’t give him a sleeping draught just yet because we don’t know what the poison is. This will hurt, no doubt.’

‘This is Agniveshya’s horror,’ Shikandin said through clenched teeth. ‘Govinda and I tried to track him down in Kandava, years ago. We heard that he was experimenting on the Nagas, trying to create the perfect poison. I was a fool to let Agniveshya go! Once again, my folly has come back to haunt Govinda.’ He turned away, his eyes filled with guilt and regret.

‘We’d better be quick,’ Dhaumya was grim. ‘The toxin is spreading through his body faster than any poison I’ve ever seen.’

‘Maraka! A plague on every Firewright,’ Partha swore. ‘Can’t you cut open his skin a little? Bleed the toxin out?’

Dhaumya shook his head. ‘He’s had a close call already. The arrow barely missed his heart – by a couple of fingers…I need to get it out before I do anything else.’

In a choked voice, Partha said, ‘It was meant for me… That arrow was meant for me…’

Govinda crooked a finger, beckoning Partha closer. Eagerly, the archer came forward. ‘Vathu, Partha! You’re killing me already…’ Govinda tried to laugh, but coughed up more blood as a result, and cringed as the arrow bit further further into his flesh.

Panchali held a cool, wet cloth to Govinda’s forehead, getting him to lie back and stay still. ‘What’re you doing here?’ he gasped.

‘Don’t worry, Govinda. I’ve seen my fair share of arrows. When I was the servant-woman Malini, one of my duties included pulling arrows out of General Keechak’s boil-covered buttocks…’

‘What? Yeaagh! Ahhh…!’

Dhaumya let out a short, nervous laugh and held out the gruesome arrowhead that he had extricated for Govinda to see. Govinda squinted,

trying to see the shaft clearly, but soon fell back on the tress, weak from the loss of blood and the stinging pain he had to endure.

‘Imagine, an old war-horse like you falling for that trick…’ Panchali teased.

‘He is old, yes, but war-horse? Really!’ Shikandin joined in.

Partha let out the breath he had been holding and threw himself flat on the ground. Dharma, too, settled back against his bed.

‘It isn’t done yet,’ Dhaumya cautioned. ‘We’ve got to bleed him a bit, get the poison out…’ Govinda closed his eyes, and clenched his fists, stifling his screams in his throat as Dhaumya pressed at the wound, forcing it to bleed copiously. A long while later, when it was done, Dhaumya covered the lesion with a poultice of herbs and resin, pinching the skin together to get it to seal as best he could.

‘That one’s going to leave a mark,’ Shikandin commented, running his hand over a long scar that spanned from his own shoulder, down across his chest. More scars covered his left side, including his arm and part of his face and neck, reminders of his battle against Bhisma Devavrata.

‘Would you rather look pretty or would you rather heal quickly and fight?’ Dhaumya challenged him.

‘If you ask me now, at the end of this war I’d say I’d rather look pretty…’ Shikandin jested.

‘Is it really the end?’ Govinda opened his eyes again, breathing hard from the effort.

Dharma was about to answer, when Panchali said, ‘It is the end, yes, almost. But who can say who has won…’

‘Vasusena is dead, isn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ Panchali confirmed.

But Dussasan – he’s alive? And Shakuni too?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Syoddhan?’

‘Yes.’

Panchali looked into Govinda’s eyes, seeing something in their dark depths that the others could not. ‘Sleep now, Govinda,’ she told him,

running her fingers through his curly hair. ‘Sleep. I’ll wake you up when it’s time.’

Govinda complied.

Dhaumya waited till he was sure Govinda was fast asleep and then let his own fears show. ‘He may not live. We’d better pray his body has the strength to resist the poison…I’ve only heard about it, all these years. It was Agniveshya Angirasa’s last and most deadly invention. They say there’s no antidote… In fact, this was probably the last of the poison…He may not…’

‘He’ll live,’ Panchali declared.

‘Panchali…’

‘The antidote is in the poultice. He will live…’

‘How…?’ Everyone turned to her, aghast.

‘The General… Back at Matsya… He had these vials…’ Panchali flinched as the memory of how it was that she had come to see them.

‘The General?’ Partha asked. He could hardly forget their year of exile in Matsya, in disguises that he wanted to not think of again, and it shocked him to hear Panchali speak of those times. ‘You knew what it was?’

‘Yes. I’ve carried it around since the war began, hoping that I’d never have to use it. When I saw the wound…’

Dharma’s face clouded over. ‘And the toxin? Where it is? Panchali, you held the chance to turn the tide of this war in your hands and you…’

‘You think I’d keep the toxin?’ Panchali lashed out. ‘What for, Dharma? Do you still not understand what this war is about, what Govinda is fighting for? All of Aryavarta has come to war to avenge an Empress’ honour; but who stands for a mere handmaiden like Malini? We cry in horror when our darling prince Abhimanyu is killed, but who cries for Hidimbya? This war is not about who has the right to hold power. It is about restoring balance, setting right the scales. Firewright, Firstborn, Kuru, Panchala…even Dharma and Syoddhan… They were means to an end, but never an end in themselves. Yet no one knows anymore what that end is…’

She trailed off, but then found her courage again. ‘Yes, I destroyed the toxin. And I’d do it again. I kept the antidote because I feared that someday the Naga-astra would come to haunt someone, somewhere. I did not think

then that it would be one of us; that it would be Govinda – but I did not have to. Some things are more important than power and hierarchy, though that power may be meant to preserve our way of life. It is simply a means. Life is the end! Don't you see?' Overcome with anxiety and exhaustion, Panchali buried her face in her hands and began to sob, giving in to the storm of emotions she had contained for days, years now.

Yuyudhana placed a reassuring hand on her head. 'I do see, Panchali. We all see. Most important, Govinda knows that you see, that you understand why he has done it all. Nothing could mean more to him.'

As they all watched, it seemed that Govinda's breathing took on the steady rhythm of a man in wholesome sleep. His worries assuaged, Yuyudhana added, 'He owes you his life, Panchali…'

Panchali looked up, a feeble smile on her tear-stained face. 'He *is* life, Yuyudhana. He owes me nothing.'

35

IT WAS NEARING DUSK WHEN PARTHA BURST INTO THE TENT where Govinda lay. He shook the still-sleeping man awake. ‘You have to see this, Govinda. Come, let me help you up.’

Too dazed to reply or refuse, Govinda let Partha raise him to his feet. He realized that the tent was nearly empty – Dharma had been allowed to leave, as had some of the other injured men he had seen. It was, he knew, a good sign, but try as he might he felt no excitement, just a sense of foreboding and doom. He hobbled out of the tent, blindly letting Partha lead him to the waiting chariot rig. Their ultimate destination was not too far away.

Govinda forced himself to concentrate on the scene that awaited them. Dharma, still wan and heavily bandaged, was in excited conversation with his brothers. All the surviving commanders and men had gathered there too, and a sense of joy filled the air.

‘What…?’ he asked, wincing as he got off the rig. He noticed an ashen Panchali standing to one side.

‘What…?’ Govinda repeated.

‘Govinda!’ Bhim roared with joy and came up to embrace him. ‘I was waiting for you, Govinda. Come, see what I’ve done. See how your promise begins to come true. Come, Govinda. Panchali, you too.’ He took one of their hands in each of his and led them to the near edge of the battlefield where a huge figure lay bloody and mangled beyond recognition.

Govinda fought back the desire to retch at the sight. Warhardened as he was, this was unlike anything he had seen, even in the past seventeen days. The dead man, if the mass of flesh could be called a man, had been torn

apart from limb to limb. With a shock, Govinda realized that much of it might have happened while life had still run through the now-dead warrior. He turned to Panchali, but she stood as she was, her eyes staring ahead, empty.

Bhim let out a savage cackle and picked up a dismembered arm. ‘You see this, Panchali? Once this belonged to Dussasan. He touched you with this hand, didn’t he? See what became of it.’ Bhim stamped down on the mutilated corpse. ‘It’s done, Panchali. You’re avenged! He lusted for you, didn’t he? Now his loins are dust. He called you a whore, didn’t he? See, I’ve ripped out his tongue. How many nights I’ve cried for you, Panchali, for what happened to you. Now, it’s done. Like I did with the General, I crushed Dussasan with my bare hands. For you, Panchali. For you!’

Only then did Govinda realize that Bhim was covered in blood and flesh. He wore Dussasan’s entrails around his neck, like a garland. His lips, his mouth, were stained red.

With a feral howl, Bhim bent down, scooping up Dussasan’s blood in his large palms. ‘He touched your hair, didn’t he, Panchali? He dragged you into the assembly hall at Hastina by your hair…’ He smeared the blood over the trembling Panchali’s head, wetting her hair, letting it soak into the dark curls.

‘See, Panchali…’ Bhim let the warm redness drip from his palms onto hers. ‘This is the blood of the man who tormented you… Drink it, smear it on yourself in victory, use it to colour your lips and cheeks or to paint your feet…Do what you will! You’re avenged, Panchali.’

Laughing like a madman, Bhim wiped his hands in her hair once again. Chest heaving, his breath coming in snorts, he paced around like a raging bull letting out a spontanous cheer. Govinda felt a sudden fire in the pit of his stomach. His eyes blurred, he looked around.

Dharma, proud, pleased, his eyes holding the satisfaction of vengeance as well as envy at knowing it was not his alone. Partha shedding tears of joy, and the twins staring at Panchali with reverence and awe. Around them, the others – Yuyudhana moving to bow to the Empress as she stood, once more, bloodstained and defiant in the midst of kings. Next to him,

Pradymna, Yudhamanyu and Uttamaujas laying their swords on the ground, pledging their allegiance and service. Shikandin and Dhrstyadymn beaming with pride and affection.

All Govinda could do was watch. And when he found his voice, there was but one word he could speak, a word that stood for all that he thought and felt, ‘Panchali…’

She turned to him, slow and lifeless. ‘Look at me, Govinda. I am death.’ Blood covered Panchali; it filled her, fell from her fingertips. In nothing less than irony, it stained her robes. ‘Look at me. I am death; I am this blood, these ravaged lands, and this wanton destruction.’ She crumpled visibly, the strength in her eyes failed as she let the hatred, revulsion and despair press in on her. She knew the war was not because of her; no, she was hardly as important as that. But, she was the death that reigned over it all. ‘I am death, Govinda,’ she repeated, raising her bloody palms up to him. ‘I am death.’

Govinda grabbed her hands, bending his head over them. Panchali gasped and tried to pull back, as the blood on her hands stained his face. He did not let go. Kissing her hands, he declared, reverential, ‘Yes, Panchali; you are death. You are death, and I am life.’ He laughed and held Panchali’s hands tight in his as she wept for all that had happened, for those who had died, and all that had been lost. At that moment, he could have sworn that the Universe was, in its own strange way, finally in balance.

Govinda did not remember when they left there, or how he was brought back to his tent. He was vaguely aware of Dhaumya’s disapproval at his expedition to the battlefield, but the Acharya’s stream of complaints against Partha and Bhim as he changed his blood-soaked bandages sounded far away. Govinda felt neither pain nor succour at the scholar’s attentions; his thoughts were at the wonderful intersection where past and present came together to form reality. A drugged sleep took him again, but the smell of lotuses that lay on his skin did not fade.

36

WHEN GOVINDA STIRRED AGAIN, HE WAS GLAD TO FEEL BETTER than he had since…he frowned, unable to clearly recollect recent events. Vague, disturbing images floated through his head, enough to make him want to go back into the dreamless state that had passed for sleep. He turned as he felt a strong touch and looked up to see a relieved Balabadra.

‘I shouldn’t have left you alone, little one,’ Balabadra said, running his large hand over Govinda’s wound. ‘It is a terrible burden that you’ve borne these past days…’

‘It’s over, Agraja,’ Govinda said.

‘Yes.’ Balabadra was solemn. His eyes held great sadness at the carnage that had taken place.

Govinda sat up, trying to recall when he had come back to the tent. He asked his brother, ‘Is it dark already?’

‘Yes. Well past midnight.’

‘And the battle?’

‘It’s over. Hardly five hundred horses, fifty elephants and four thousand men remain, both sides put together.’

‘Was there more battle? How did Partha…?’

‘Pradymna drove him. Made some dramatic statement about following in his father’s footsteps, I believe.’

‘So that’s it, then? And Syoddhan? Shakuni?

‘Shakuni died at Sadev’s hands. Syoddhan is still alive, along with Kritavarman, Kripa and Asvattama. Syoddhan’s younger brother Sudarsa was also alive, but mortally hurt… he won’t live through the night. Devala has escaped, but I suppose that should not come as a shock to any of us.

Loyalty was never all that important to him. And before he left he ransacked the library at Hastina, burning whatever was in there. Vidur wasn't able to save anything, Govinda. But I still do not understand how the Firstborn let it happen. Suka…'

'Sanjaya…' Govinda interrupted. 'Where is Sanjaya?'

'Sanjaya has been captured. Yuyudhana took him alive. He awaits your instructions…'

Govinda said, 'I need to talk to Sanjaya. Perhaps, since the battle is over, I'll kill him myself. Yes, I'd enjoy that,' he finished with an unusual hint of rage.

'It's a punishment he would well deserve, my son,' an old, feeble voice added.

Recognizing the voice, Govinda made to sit up straight out of respect, but the old man shuffled forward to make him lie down. Krishna Dwaipayana, former Vyasa of the Firstborn, seated himself next to the injured man's tress. 'I don't know what to say to you, Govinda,' he confessed. 'I don't know where to begin. A part of me wants to embrace you, while another part of me wants to curse you for all that you've done. Tell me, what should I do?'

'What you've always done, Acharya. That which you think is in the best interests of Aryavarta.'

'Then you understand what I've done; why I did so…?'

'I do. I also know that Aryavarta, this earth and all of existence, these are beyond our little judgements of right and wrong. All we can hope to do is remain true to ourselves.'

Dwaipayana said, 'Then you'll also understand when I say that this isn't over between you and I?'

'Time is the most inevitable, the most powerful of all forces. It does not depend on you and me, on our little roles in the larger scheme of things, to find its way, to fulfill itself. If not you then someone else; if not here then somewhere else. The Universe goes on. But, for now, yes, it's not over between you and I…'

‘Then you’ll also understand if just this once I ask you to explain a few things to me rather than me attempting to convince you?’

Govinda shrugged.

Dwaipayana asked, ‘Tell me from the beginning. There is no denying you helped bring the Firewright order down, you hastened their fall. Why did you do it? Your relationship with the Wrights was more than just that of teacher and student… wasn’t it? Then why? Why set Aryavarta on the path of glory only to then destroy the realm with this war? If there is anything I have learnt about you in these years, Govinda, it is that you are not a power-hungry man. But if that is not the explanation for your actions, then what is?’

Govinda said, ‘Reason, compassion…or simply because it had to be done. Aryavarta’s soul was prisoner to its own systems. We had surrendered to a third power, for we had crafted a way of life that had grown larger, stronger than us…’

‘And so you wanted to destroy it?

‘Yes. But I did so with no sense of heroism. What Aryavarta is today, what we all are, is the product of Time, the inevitable turning of the wheels of its fast chariot. What I have built, someone else will destroy and so it will go on.’

‘Then it is all in vain?’

‘No, Acharya! Some things don’t change. Love doesn’t change. Compassion and humanity don’t change. Our search for something larger, for the Divine, doesn’t change.’

‘And what does love have to do with matters of state?’ Dwaipayana scoffed. ‘Is love and compassion enough to quell greed and ambition? What you speak of is a way of life the gods long for. It’s far beyond our reach as humans. The same corruption and lust for power will guide us in the future, as you claim it does now.’

‘Yes, it will. And then another Vyasa will rise, as will another Secret Keeper, and another cowherd, though we may call them by different names.’

Dwaipayana said, ‘What you propose is…unnatural. We need Divine Order; we need destiny. How can we leave righteousness and justice to the care of flawed, ridiculously imperfect human beings? We do so at the risk of doom!

‘Doom?’ Govinda laughed. ‘Yes, I once believed that we were doomed. I thought the only hope was to overcome human frailty and become creatures of dispassion and reason. Yet, the greatest mystery, the greatest wonder of creation is that we are capable of both relentless reason and boundless love… It is not about what we are, but what we can become. That is why the ancients once said that perhaps the Primordial Creator knows the answers, or perhaps even he knows them not. Where you see the unknown and call it nothingness, I see our limitless potential. I see Vasudeva Narayana, asleep on the Endless Ocean. He will wake, and that is how we transform and go on, from age to age…’

‘You do your teacher great credit, my son,’ Dwaipayana admitted. ‘You make me wish that the honour had been mine…’

‘But it is, Acharya, in more ways that you know. I say this without malice or spite…’

‘If that’s the case, will you forgive this old man if he calls you a fool, Govinda?’

‘But of course, and I wouldn’t expect you to say otherwise. Your world is a different world. Your world is one where love is requited, and sacrifice has meaning. My world, the world around us now and that of the future is a place where love and justice both fail, and we have no choice but to accept it in the name of destiny. All action and all compassion is in vain. Tell me, what about this way of life is worth saving?

Dwaipayana said, ‘It is sacrilege to question divinity. It is also as irrelevant as it is irreverent. You are an aberration, and aberrations are doomed to fail. They must fail; embraced and stifled by the very flow of things that you try to subvert.’

‘Your faith in the system is overwhelming. And it proves my point,’ Govinda said.

‘It also affirms that when we are done philosophizing and exchanging pithy words, I will still smite you down in a way you cannot imagine. It is a trade *you* made, remember? I gave you the present, but in exchange for the future. It is for me to now choose what tale will be told, and I assure you that neither my kin nor I shall come out the worse for it.’

Govinda shook his head. ‘This story began generations before you or I were born. Bharata, the first of Aryavarta’s Emperors, was as much of Angirasa blood as he was of Varuni descent…’

‘Indeed, the line of nobility has been contaminated time again by heretics and the ignoble.’

‘Have you tried explaining that to Sanjaya? He has tales of his own.’

‘Yes,’ Dwaipayana sighed. ‘I should have realized that it would be difficult for him to understand…’

The conversation ebbed as the scholar stared into the distance. The bustle and clanging that had been the war was now absent. Occasionally, a bird or two chirped or the wind whistled through the tentpoles. But that was all. The war was over. Only silence remained.

Dwaipayana closed his eyes, and with effort began, ‘My mother… Satya… I sometimes wonder if my father knew that she was a Firewright, after all. He may have thought it was the ultimate triumph, that a Firewright should bear the child of a Firstborn scholar. Or maybe he didn’t care. My mother was a woman of honour. She wanted the Wrights destroyed, just as my father did. There was no denying that…’

‘Didn’t you ask her why?’

‘Why she turned against her own? Of course I knew why…’

‘Then *you* understand why I…?’

‘No, Govinda; I said I knew why. When Princess Satya, as she was then, realized that the terrible weapons that the Wrights made in ones and twos could, with some change, be made in huge numbers, she was right to fear for the future. That is what binds us, Govinda; that is what binds the three of us: that we saw the huge danger that awaited Aryavarta. Who knows, one day you may learn to see from my point of view after all…’

‘No, Acharya. The bond exists, but not quite as you think. You believe in controlling power. I believe in tempering it with compassion. Your solution, unlike your mother’s, would have been to raze not just the Wrights but also the people of Matsya to the ground so as to punish them for daring to tamper with Divine Order. The Princess, on the other hand, sought to remove the source of the problem. She turned against her own and, with your father, hoped to destroy the Wrights completely.’

‘And you, Govinda? Or will you now pretend that you’re a preserver, a creature of mercy?’

‘I too hope to destroy power. I hope to shatter it, wherever it’s concentrated. No, let me restate that: Time, the Greatest Destroyer of all will shatter power wherever it’s concentrated. You and I, we are both merely the instruments of Time…’

Dwaipayana hissed through clenched teeth, ‘Look around you! This is not the consequence of mere instruments. You are either a god or a demon, for no one else can be so flippant with destiny and divinity.’

‘I don’t know what Divinity is,’ Govinda admitted, ‘but I do know that it’s worth searching for, just as I know that it can only be found within. And that is the immutable truth, irrespective of the legends that we clothe it in.’

‘Each one of us a god?’ Dwaipayana asked, contemptuous.

‘You can put it that way if you wish, but I don’t like that idea. You see, you believe in superiority, inferiority, in hierarchies. My words sound heretic to you, because you think I elevate myself to the level of the gods. I, on the other hand, believe in oneness. There is no superiority or inferiority when all you have is one being…’

‘I can understand why everyone adores you, Govinda. Even your blasphemy has a charm of its own, but it is blasphemy all the same. There may be limits to reason, but not to Truth, which is why we need gods; we need to know that there is something beyond us.’

‘We need to know there’s something beyond us, yes; but we also need that something to be alive, vital, full of potential and benevolence. It cannot be some immutable order, however divine. It cannot be destiny.’

Dwaipayana studied Govinda. The warrior was trying hard to do justice to the debate, but weariness was catching up with him. The old scholar said, ‘This war between you and me was no less than the war that raged on in the fields outside. Well fought!’

‘Thank you, Acharya.’

Dwaipayana thought for a while, and then said, ‘Will you do something for me, Govinda; something for an old man who has given his life in service to these lands?’

‘I am at your disposal, Acharya.’

‘Spare Sanjaya.’ He hesitated and added, ‘In the name of the one who is now Secret Keeper, I ask you this. He would not, I know, deny me this request. I ask you to show me the same favour.’

Govinda could not hide his astonishment. Nor, he realized, did he want to. He felt lighter all of a sudden, as though he no longer carried the burden of a secret alone. And then, as he saw how heavy the truth weighed on the old Dwaipayana, his release gave way to pity. He understood why the scholar had fought to defend his point of view, tried so hard to explain the reasoning behind his actions. Dwaipayana’s defeat was now complete and, the old man knew it. ‘How…?’ he asked.

‘He told me,’ Dwaipayana said. ‘He told me about it all. What better place to hide the Secret Keeper of the Firewrights – and not just any Secret Keeper, but the one on whom all hopes of the future rested – than nestled in the heart of the Firstborn Order? Was it your idea?’

‘It was her idea. Agniveshya’s daughter.’ Govinda breathed in deep, as though the smell of lotuses lingered in his thoughts of her, and repeated, ‘It was all her idea.’

‘And what would she want for Sanjaya?’

Govinda smiled. ‘As you wish, Acharya.’

Dwaipayana stood up and said, ‘Varuna protect you, Govinda. May you live long.’ He left, aided by a young acolyte Govinda had not seen before. The two scholars briefly blocked the sunlight that filtered through the narrow opening of the tent, and then they were gone.

Govinda turned to his brother and instructed, ‘Let Sanjaya go. And tell Dharma to send Yuyutsu to Hastina right away. He is not to go to the palace, but straight to Vidur. This isn’t about enforcing a claim; we need to make sure that the people are safe in these changing times. Also, tell Dhrstyadymn to double the guards around our camp. This isn’t over as long as Syoddhan lives.’

Balabadra flinched at the mention of Syoddhan – his old student and dear friend. He nevertheless stood up and made to leave, to carry out Govinda’s instructions. Turning back at the entrance to the tent, he observed, ‘He won’t spare you, you know,’ he observed. ‘Dwaipayana: He appears a benevolent old man but his mind remains sharp, and his wrath just as fiery.’

‘Then I shall pay the price.’

‘I hope it was worth it, Govinda. For we shall all pay the price with you.’

‘You tell me whether it was a worthy sacrifice, Agraja. An individual for a family, a village for a kingdom… an Empire for Humanity.’

37

SYODDHAN SAT ON A WELL-ROUNDED ROCK; EXAMINING THE armour that Dron had given him during the war. Wright-metal. *The armour of Indra himself…* With a sigh, he cast it aside and resumed his activity of throwing pebbles into the glimmering lake.

‘Why did you come here?’ he asked the tall warrior who stood nearby.

‘Because I owe you my allegiance.’

‘And what would you want your liege-lord to do now, Asvattama? Fight at your side? Make a last stand?’

‘But of course!’

Syoddhan laughed, the sound hollow. ‘No, what’s the point of doing that?’

‘But…’

‘I’m no coward, Asvattama. I just don’t see any reason you should die… Aryavarta needs men like you, brave men who can defend it. There is no point in you wasting your life… Go to Hastina and offer your assistance to my father; there is much to be done. Whether you will serve Dharma or not is your choice, but for now, I still am the ruler of this realm. Help me care for my people.’

‘What do you mean, Syoddhan?’

‘I’ve asked Dharma and his brothers to meet me here, so that I can speak with them. It’s best you go now.’

‘And? What would you have me tell Kritavarman and Uncle Kripa? That I ran away, leaving you here alone?’

‘Tell them that you followed your king’s orders. I mean it, Asvattama, I order you to go!’

‘Syoddhan, please…’

‘Go!’

Defeated, Asvattama acquiesced. ‘All right.’

‘Wait!’

Syoddhan chuckled as the other man turned back, hope alight in his eyes. He then turned grim. ‘Have you any news of Sanjaya?’

‘No, but I promise you, Syoddhan, I’ll slit his throat as soon as I see him, the murdering scum.’

‘And add to my sins of fratricide? First Vasusena, now Sanjaya…’ He shook his head. ‘It’s bad enough they’ve spent their lives deprived of their right as princes… No, Asvattama, promise me that Sanjaya won’t be harmed.’

‘But why? After all that he has done…’

‘He had his reasons. In his place, I might have done the same. We deprived him of his rightful status, we drove him to empathize with what he’d been taught was the dark stain upon his family – his great-grandmother and his grandmother, both Firewrights, both women of courage and defiance. He served the Vyasa, yes, but in his heart Sanjaya has always been a Wright… Did you know this?’ Syoddhan asked Asvattama.

‘I suspected as much. Especially about his great-grandmother… And when he turned up at Hastina with Devala in tow there was no longer room for doubt. For what it’s worth, Syoddhan, it would not have changed anything between us. Even…’ he hesitated under the weight of his own admission, before saying, ‘Even the Secret Keeper could not change anything between us.’

‘I know. You make me think that the Wrights can’t be half as bad as the Firstborn made them out to be… Or will you still give us your old line, that you are an Angirasa but not a Firewright!’

The two friends laughed together for the last time, their voices ringing through the woods around them.

‘I needed that…’ Syoddhan confessed. Standing up, he embraced Asvattama for what he knew might be the last time. ‘Go now, before Dharma arrives… I want to do this alone.’

Asvattama bowed deep, as he would only before the greatest of men. ‘Rudra protect you, my king,’ he wished Syoddhan and walked into the woods.

Syoddhan could hear Asvattama untie his horse and ride away. Still smiling, he sat down again at the lake’s edge and continued to entertain himself with the pebbles, watching the dancing ripples on the water’s surface with all the wonder of a child. After a while, he heard footsteps followed by a hushed exchange.

‘There he is.’

‘Maybe it’s a trap?’

‘No,’ Govinda’s familiar voice affirmed, as he emerged from the woods into the small glade. Syoddhan was filled with joy as he recognized the man who just behind Govinda.

‘Balabadra!’ Syoddhan was on his feet, bowing low to his mentor. Balabadra was lost for words, but the anguish on his face said it all. Syoddhan, however, was less dismayed. He said, ‘Come now. It is time your student made you proud. I shall live through this with honour or die with dignity. Either way, victory is mine!’

He smiled at Govinda, who nodded at him in greeting but otherwise remained impassive. Then Syoddhan went forward to meet Dharma, but paused, surprised to see Panchali and her brothers.

Syoddhan found himself thinking of the day of Dharma’s coronation decades ago, of the few words he and Panchali had shared by a sparkling pond with its exquisite fountain. For the first time he noticed how she looked much like she had that day. Her eyes were still the same haunting, hypnotic ones he remembered from the archery contest at Kampilya, but her bearing had become wiser, stronger, slightly cruel, as an Empress ought to be.

With a wistful smile, Syoddhan turned away from her to adress Dharma. ‘So, my brother, let us end this where it all began, generations ago…’

Dharma was unimpressed. ‘I see. You’ll now lay the blame on our forefathers, will you?’ He glanced around him, and said, ‘Ah yes, the barren tract that was once a riverbed. All that remains of life here is this small lake.

Yes, a memorable place for Firewright and Firstborn both. But I fail to see what it has to do with you, Syoddhan.'

'Never mind,' Syoddhan waved it aside. 'You once asked me to make peace with you and I refused. I can't expect you to believe that I had little choice but to refuse or that I have wanted nothing more than peace, with all my heart. Now I have nothing left to restrain me, neither friend nor enemy… And so, Dharma, I ask you now for peace. Peace on any terms you want. Aryavarta is yours, and you are its lawful Emperor. Take anything, everything you want…'

Dharma opened his mouth to say something but Syoddhan held up a hand and continued, 'Those I fought for, those who I hoped would rule this earth and revel in its pleasures, are dead. I have nothing to live for, nothing to fight for.'

Dharma was enraged. 'How dare you presume I'd take what you throw to me as though I were a beggar? I will win this Empire from you in fair battle, and over your lifeless body!'

'Fair, you say?' Balabadra interceded. 'If you truly mean that, Dharma, then allow Syoddhan to rest. You know that he held your men back, single-handed, yesterday. He is tired and wounded and in no position to duel.'

Dharma then turned on Balabadra. 'Why should I show this scum, this smear on the honour of my family, any pity? What pity did he show us when we begged from him but five villages in the cause of peace? What kindness did he show us, when we stood forsaken by our own at the dice game? What mercy did he show Panchali when Dussasan dragged her into the assembly by her hair? That insult was but partly avenged with the spilling of Dussasan's blood, but today it shall be complete.'

Balabadra made to retort, but Syoddhan rested his hand on his teacher's shoulder to restrain him. 'Balabadra asked for justice and fairness, not pity and mercy. Neither he nor I are cowards to grovel at your feet, Dharma. If you wish to settle this in battle, so be it. I am ready. As you can see, my armour lies on the river bank, and I stand before you with nothing but my sword and mace…'

A dismayed Balabadra appealed in silence to Govinda, and hesitation and doubt flickered across Dharma's face. But Govinda said nothing. He simply crossed his arms over his chest and stood where he was. Balabadra's nostrils flared, but he held his temper in check.

Taking his speechlessness for assent, Dharma nodded at Bhim, who got set for battle, though not without some hesitation. 'The mace?' he asked Syoddhan.

'The mace,' Syoddhan said with an affectionate look at Balabadra, 'just like in the old days…'

'And I remain stronger than you, Syoddhan, just like it was in the old days,' Bhim declared.

The others backed away, letting the two warriors have the sandy lakeside tract for their arena. Then with a great cry, Bhim fell on his opponent, dealing what could have been a killing strike. Syoddhan deftly stepped away and used the opportunity to land a few blows on Bhim, from the side. 'And I,' he said, 'remain more skilled than you. Just like it was in the old days!'

The statement rankled Bhim. He spun around, swinging his adamantine mace at Syoddhan's skull. The sheer force of his move made the others move back further, giving both combatants a wider space. This time, Syoddhan did not dodge, but brought his weapon up to repel Bhim's. He nearly lost his balance with the move, but was well rewarded for his attempt as Bhim took a hit on the face.

Syoddhan paused as the ensuing cut on Bhim's left temple bled profusely into his eyes, distracting him. Bhim wiped away the blood even as Dharma shouted at him to move in quickly. Ignoring Dharma's shouts, Bhim faced Syoddhan. 'Ready?'

'Ready.'

Once again, the two men flew at each other, this time, their maces ringing in quick succession, swinging and parrying. Despite his injuries, Syoddhan seemed to be doing well. He fought calmly, using skill and strategy.

Bhim, on the other hand, was beginning to lose his advantage to wrath. He heaped on the taunts and insults, snarling and yelling. It soon became his undoing, as Syoddhan landed the perfect strike to his chest. The blow would have no doubt crushed a weaker man's heart. Bhim merely staggered back, pausing just long enough to take a deep breath. Then, spitting out the blood and phlegm that had collected in his mouth, he flew at Syoddhan again, trying to catch the man unawares.

Syoddhan took the blow, returning it with one of his own. Spinning around, he landed a double-handed strike on Bhim's upper arm, trying to get him to drop his mace. But Bhim held on. He could sense Syoddhan beginning to tire as his wounds, old and new, bled profusely and he began to limp.

Chests heaving, the two men circled the makeshift arena, biding their time. Bhim watched his opponent closely. Syoddhan's left leg had to have been injured in the previous day's encounter, either by an arrow, or when he had been thrown to the ground from his rig. The disadvantage did not show when Syoddhan moved to his right, but he was visibly slower when he had to lead with his left. With a snarl, Bhim rushed Syoddhan, aiming at his right. Syoddhan, however, did not dodge left, as Bhim had expected. Instead he spun around at the very last instant, letting Bhim's mace miss him by a few fingers. At the same time, though, he raised his own weapon and brought it down hard, once again on Bhim's arm.

Bhim felt fire run through him as a bone shattered and his arm was dislodged from its socket. He could feel the searing pain of muscles being torn, and every nerve and sinew in his arm burned and throbbed. 'Aaah!' the cry of distress slipped from him as he fell to his knees.

Syoddhan lowered his weapon and waited.

'Bhim! Are you all right?' Dharma called out.

Bhim shut his eyes and doubled over in an effort to combat the ache. At length he raised his head, trying to find the right words to speak, to say some words of sense and possibly conciliation. As he did so, he realized with a start that Syoddhan had not moved back. In fact, Syoddhan stood

close by, on Bhim's right, his mace swinging loose from his hand, the tip resting on the ground.

Bhim tightened his grip on his own weapon. Then, still kneeling, he lifted his mace and, without warning, struck Syoddhan on his thigh. Syoddhan tried to dodge but his injured leg prevented him from moving fast enough, and he bore the full brunt of the blow. The sound of his bones shattering echoed through the glade.

Bhim stood up at once, ready to counter and defend but there was no need. Syoddhan had already toppled over, his body an awkward bag of flesh. The blow had broken his pelvic bone, disjoining his legs from his upper body. Four of his ribs had splintered; another three had snapped and jutted out from his stomach like daggers emerging from within. Skin and flesh rent open, Syoddhan's guts spilled out in a bloody mess.

'You coward! You cheat!' Balabadra ran forward. 'By Hara, I'll kill you for this, Bhim! Hah!'

'No, Balabadra!' Dharma shouted, as a stunned Bhim staggered back.

'Balabadra, no!' Syoddhan's voice was a weak whisper.

Dharma and Partha ineffectively tried intervene but Balabadra shrugged them off as though they were children. Snarling, he pounced on Bhim.

Govinda stepped in, quickly wrapping his arms around Balabadra. The two men fell to the ground with the force of their collision, but quickly scrambled to their feet. Before Balabadra could attack again, Govinda bodily restrained him.

'Don't stop me, Govinda!' Balabadra shouted, his eyes filled with tears. 'What world is this? What shame! Are justice and honour dead? Have morality and nobility been overrun by greed and power-lust? How can you let this happen? How can you bear to watch all this?'

'I can't,' Govinda confessed. 'I can't bear to watch it all. But I must. We must. Yes, the world has come to this… Someday, I may even ask you to spill the blood of those you love the most, to destroy everything. But today, I must ask you to wait… Trust me, brother…'

Balabadra stopped resisting and let out a sob. Govinda let go. 'I'm sorry,' Balabadra said to the collapsed Syoddhan. For all that had happened,

the end of the Great War would be nothing more than an anticlimactic admission of victory and defeat.

Govinda squeezed his brother's shoulder and went towards the fallen warrior. Ignoring the confused expressions on the others' faces, he knelt down.

Syoddhan had the look of a jubilant victor, as he gasped out, 'So… so it comes to this…I… bear you no malice, Govinda. I hold nothing against… anyone. We…we did what we had to; we fought… for what we believed was right. It was a good battle, and both our victories are… well-won.'

Govinda lifted the limp man up to a sitting position, bearing his weight. 'Indeed, you've won…'

'To fight… you is an honour. And… that honour is victory.'

Govinda said, 'I'm not as good a man as you think.'

The denial spurred a last burst of strength in Syoddhan. His voice was suddenly clear, but also distant, as though he spoke from far away: 'So you say. But the truth is, you've done right by us all. I go now to the realms of my forefathers, where I shall sit at the head of any table and be the first to drink at every feast. My life is not forfeit; rather, it's given in a good cause, given as a sacred ritual of sacrifice. If so, you're its priest, and I have had the privilege of being the sacrificial offering. History shall not speak of you without taking my name too. Yes, they may call us enemies and, perhaps, we've lived so but…' He descended into a fit of coughing, blood spewing from punctured lungs.

'You die as my friend, Syoddhan,' Govinda completed. 'I only wish I'd said these words before…'

Hoarse and faint, Syoddhan rasped, 'You can say them many times over when we meet again.' He smiled and closed his eyes. Slowly, his breathing became shallow. Moments later, it stopped.

Govinda sat still, cradling the dead prince in his arms. He showed no obvious sorrow, but stared into the distance, as though he saw into the past or maybe the future. After some time, he let Syoddhan's limp form roll to the ground and stood up, covered in the warrior's blood. It was streaked across his face; it had soaked his robes and stuck in matted clumps to his

hair. His palms were red, red and warm. He stared at them, the flaring of his nostrils the single clue to the storm of emotions he hid so well.

‘It’s done then,’ Bhim said, stunned and relieved at the thought. He let his mace fall from his hands. ‘It’s done…’

‘No,’ Govinda said, ‘it’s not done yet.’ Eyes filled with fire, he walked up to Dharma. Gripping the man’s hand firmly, he told him, ‘Aryavarta is now yours. Rule it well, *Emperor*.’ With that, he walked away, his tread heavy and tired. Balabadra glared at the reinstated ruler with pure wrath and followed.

Dharma Yudhisthir the Just, Emperor of Aryavarta, turned, triumphant, to his companions. His brothers, however, appeared not to share his joy, and he saw Panchali gazing at him with…was it pity? He blinked in disbelief and challenged her with his eyes. She nodded to his hands. Dharma looked down to see his hands were smeared with blood. Syoddhan’s blood. It soaked the ground. It stained the river. It blossomed on the trees. It streaked the sky. And its metallic taste filled the wind.

The land around him, his Aryavarta, flourished with death.

Dharma finally understood. Govinda Shauri had kept the oath he had made in the forests of Kamyaka, without exception. He had sworn upon the mountains, the skies and the oceans, that he would change Aryavarta as they knew it. He had promised that those who had hurt Panchali, those who had failed her, would pay. And Dharma Yudhisthir’s would be the most terrible punishment of them all.

Part 3

1

SHIKANDIN WALKED INTO HIS TENT AND THREW HIMSELF ONTO his bed with a weary groan. At no time during the war had he felt as tired as he did now. At dawn, camp would have to be broken, the dead accounted for, and the living paid for their services and despatched to their homes. Armies, or what was left of them after eighteen days of battle, had to be disbanded and regrouped, sometimes rebuilt, and a hundred other things would have to be done to bring life back to normal in the nations of Aryavarta.

There were things he personally had to see to as well. Devala Asita had left Syoddhan's camp the night Vasusena had fallen and Shikandin was determined to hunt him down. There also remained the question of seeing into reality the dream the war had been fought for, beginning with his homeland, Panchala. Dhrstyadymn would eventually have to relinquish his throne and a different ruler – one chosen by the people – would be set up in his stead.

But first, Shikandin noted, he had to deal with a problem that was far more immediate. Opening his eyes, he propped himself up on his elbows and addressed what appeared to be a dark, empty corner of his tent. 'You might as well take a seat, you know. Pour us both some wine while you're at it.'

Asvattama stepped forward with a weak smile. His fair skin was leathery and bloodless, and his eyes held a strained, haunted look. 'You took your time figuring out I was here, Shikandin. You've lost your touch!'

'I'm relaxing. The war is over… It wouldn't hurt you to loosen up a little too.'

Asvattama sighed. ‘I can’t. I’m bound to avenge my father. It was the last… In fact, it was the only thing he’s asked of me. You know what that means.’

‘Not an enviable position…’

‘It’s not,’ Asvattama admitted, handing Shikandin a goblet he had half-filled. He sat down, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

Shikandin knew well what Asvattama meant. He glanced out of the tent at the cool moonlight outside. The wheel of Time had turned, sweeping out the past and ushering in the future: A new age. A nighthawk flew overhead, gliding with natural grace. *Gliding free*. Govinda’s words echoed in his ears: *We are merely the instruments of Time*. Shikandin saw what he had to do. He realized, in fact, that he had known it all along, since the day the war had begun.

His heart at ease, Shikandin looked at Asvattama. ‘We still have time to finish our wine…’ he said, enigmatic.

Asvattama did not notice. He picked up his goblet. ‘Do you remember the day we put up the first waterwheel, east of the stone mines? I can’t forget how excited and happy we were that day, dancing under the stream like children… Hah, by Rudra, I had never behaved that way. And probably won’t again.’

Shikandin drained his cup. ‘Those were good days.’

A poignant, meaningful silence filled the space between the two men for a short while, after which Shikandin stood up and said, ‘Thank you for coming to me first, Asvattama.’

Asvattama, too, got to his feet. ‘I’m not sure what I fight for anymore. Are you?’

‘Govinda. We fight for Govinda; both of us do. We fight for his dream, for Aryavarta, the world.’

‘And his dream is but a mirror of ours, a mirror of the hopes we have always had for our people. A realm based on reason, where the people are masters of their own destiny and rulers of their own fate. A realm where the emperor is beholden to his subjects first and the gods and nobles next…’

Asvattama sighed. ‘Did you think it would be so difficult? I’d thought the task was nearly done when Govinda made Dharma emperor the first time.’

Shikandin shook his head. ‘To be honest, I’d thought so too. It would have, had we had enough time. But well before change could be effected, Dharma Yudhisthir played dice…’

‘The fault for what happened next lies with us all.’

‘True. Though Govinda holds himself to blame.’

‘Because of Panchali.’

‘No, Asvattama. Panchali’s pain has been and will always remain a wound to Govinda’s heart. What he really blames himself for is not seeing that true change comes when the existing system is defied, not bargained with. He had hoped to use the Emperor’s paramount power over his subjects to set in place a rule by the people. But…’

‘You wouldn’t have failed him, Shikandin. If he had made you Emperor…’

‘He didn’t. And he had his reasons.’

‘But… When the world looks back on these eighteen days, Shikandin, when future generations look back on us, what will they say? Will they say that Govinda Shauri cleansed Aryavarta of evil? I don’t really care whether they blame him or adore him for it, but will they lay a repugnant culling, this slaughter, on him? Or will they see this for what it was – a revolution? Will they see that this was no murder but sacrifice, the inexorable willingness of people to die for what they believed in?’

‘What does it matter, Asvattama? It is almost done now. We are nearly there. We cannot know what history and legend will follow our names, or Govinda’s, and it ought not to matter at all. All that remains is for us to show one man that this was true revolution, that this dream can be a reality. We must show him that the faith he once had in Govinda was not misplaced.’

‘Indeed, my friend. The Secret Keeper must know what it is we have all fought for, what it is that one of us must now die for. We are no longer different, are we? Not from each other, and not from anyone else.’

It was a statement few could have understood, but both men had no doubts as to its meaning. Like Govinda, they too could see beyond their own fleeting, transient identities. Shikandin spoke the words, relishing the precious privilege of finally saying them out loud: ‘We are common citizens of Aryavarta, and there could be no greater honour.’

With that, he drew his sword.

Asvattama did the same.

Then the two warriors fell on each other.

2

GOVINDA LOOKED AROUND HASTINA. IT WAS CHEERLESS, BEREFT of all life and joy. No lamps were visible, and an air of mourning lay heavy over the entire city. The palace was shorn of all grandeur and majesty, its hallways and chambers empty and untended. There was no weeping, no wailing, no women cursing and mourning, no men swearing death and revenge. There was nothing. In a strange way he found it consoling.

Like land, barren after a harvest, Govinda mused. *It needs to be ploughed and tended before it blooms, verdant once again.*

He had agreed with Dharma's suggestion that they pacify the mourning elders – King Dhritarastra and Queen Gandhari – at the earliest. Without their blessings, Dharma was just a bloody conqueror and not the legitimate king. Such legitimacy would have to be purchased at a price. Someone had to the bear the brunt of Dhritarastra and Gandhari's anger, particularly as Dharma delivered the news of Syoddhan's fall.

Govinda stopped mid-stride as Queen Gandhari's recent wrath rang in his ears: 'You will know this pain someday, Govinda. You will cry over the corpses of your sons, as I cry over mine!' He had accepted the curse without protest, and left Dharma and his brothers to console the grieving king and queen.

It was, Govinda knew, also the appropriate occasion for long-hidden truths to emerge. Pritha would have to reveal her secret to Dharma, disclose the complex bonds of blood that explained much of all that had happened. Vasusena, Sanjaya… It was imperative that Dharma understood that his dubious entitlements to the Kuru crown were not the reason why he had been placed on a throne, yet again.

And so, many loose ends would soon be tied up, and that was a good beginning. For his part, Govinda had a few things that he needed to deal with. One needed resolution; the other, however… Govinda let the thought trail away as the smell of parchment ash and burnt stone hit his nostrils. He realized that he had arrived at his intended destination, though he had not recognized it as such.

Fallen pillars, rubble and ruin were all that remained of what had once been the library of Hastina. Govinda reached out to place a hand on a soot-blackened pillar and, in an unusual show of emotion, rested his forehead on the back of his palm, letting the gravity of all that had come to pass distil in him. After a while, he drew himself together and began to make his way deeper into the ruins, when the muffled sound of conversation came from the shadows. The man Govinda had come to see was not alone.

‘…tell me!’ the words echoed from the stones. ‘I know Dwaipayana has spoken to you, that he has told you who the Secret Keeper is. Tell me, or in Agni’s name your blood shall wash the soot off these stones.’

‘What’s the point, Devala…’ a voice Govinda recognized as Sanjaya’s came, sullen, through the hollows. ‘It’s too late.’

‘Too late?’ Devala’s malicious rasp left no doubt as to his further intent. He affirmed as much with his next words. ‘You traitor! I shouldn’t have trusted you.’

‘As I said, it’s too late…’ Sanjaya repeated, his tone defiant in the face of Devala’s aggression.

The tell-tale ring of a blade being drawn from its scabbard. Govinda began to run, jumping over piles of rubble, in the direction of the voices. He passed through what had once been corridors into a moonlit space that had, not too long ago, been a working area for the scribes to see Devala in the act of swinging his sword down at a helpless, kneeling Sanjaya.

‘Devala! No!’ Govinda shouted, drawing a dagger from his waistband and hurling it in the Firewright’s direction. The blade went precisely through Devala’s wrist, making him drop his sword and scream out in pain. The few moments were all Govinda needed to get close to the two men.

‘Puuya!’ Devala cursed out loud at the sight of his challenger, but did not attempt to retrieve his weapon, nor did he intend to give fight. He turned to run, pausing only to knock down a pile of loose wall stones to block Govinda’s path, expecting the other man would give chase. Govinda did not. Instead, he came to a stop where Sanjaya lay toppled over, his hands tied behind his back.

Govinda quickly undid the bonds and helped Sanjaya to his feet, all the while watching with a frown as Devala made his escape, clambering out from the ruins and running across the deserted palace grounds to scale the unguarded outer walls and disappear.

‘Go…go after him…’ Sanjaya gasped.

‘No, Sanjaya,’ Govinda said. ‘Now is not the time.’

The declaration seemed to remind Sanjaya of all the hatred and animosity he bore Govinda, for the courtier’s eyes flashed with rage. The anger faded away as swiftly as it had come, and he asked, dully, ‘Is that your decision, or the Secret Keeper’s?’

Govinda smiled, though not unkindly, for he saw the torment in Sanjaya’s eyes. The same secret that had destroyed Dwaipayana had also claimed Sanjaya. For completely contrary reasons, neither man could bear the thought that the Secret Keeper of the Firewrights had been hidden, all these years, in the heart of the Firstborn. And now, after a great war and much bloodshed, it was time for this singular fact to serve its ultimate purpose.

‘The decision is mine,’ Govinda said. ‘Though you might find it more bearable if I told you it was his. Truly, he and I have never been at cross-purposes…’

‘And what purpose was that?’ Sanjaya snapped.

Govinda let his breath out in a loud sigh. In a dull voice, he said, ‘With the war, all Firewright weapons are gone, the anointed keepers of those weapons are gone, and with them gone their way of life, built on hierarchy and power, is in the past. As for the future – we have a chance to make a fresh start. What we call knowledge, where did it come from? It wasn’t handed down to us from the skies, or dug out from stone. It is we who

sought it out, and we who found it. When our forebears had the ability to reach for the light of truth, why do you doubt that those who follow us won't?'

'They will. I don't doubt that. But I also don't doubt that they will inevitably stand at the brink of war, as we did.'

'Those concerns I will leave to the Govindas and Sanjayas of that age. We have our own concerns to address.'

'Will you address one for me? Will you answer one question, just one question for no reason other than that I ask?'

'If I can, yes.'

'Why did you save me? What do you want from me?'

Govinda placed his hands on Sanjaya's shoulders. The courtier flinched at his adversary's touch. Ignoring it, Govinda asked, 'Is it so difficult to believe that I do something simply because it is the right thing to do, the kind thing to do? I owe much to your grandfather and father, and their request alone would compel me to protect you. But that is not the sole reason, Sanjaya. You are one of us. And I believe that you are still capable of loyalty.'

'Loyalty to whom, Govinda? To your Secret Keeper? By Agni, I'd spit in his face…'

'Then you'd spit in the face of the one in whose name you have done all that you have done. You'd spit in the face of Ghora Angirasa and his legacy.'

'Don't you dare lay claim to his legacy, you…!'

'Not I, Sanjaya. There is another. The idea of hiding the Secret Keeper of the Firewrights amidst the Firstborn came from Ghora's own heir and was agreed to by the Acharya himself. Ghora Angirasa's death, the empire that I once built for Dharma Yudhisthir…all those were but means to that end. Yet, somehow, somewhere, this story became bigger than those plans, bigger than any of us, and…'

Govinda stopped short as Sanjaya grabbed his upper arms in a rough mirror of his stance. 'Is it true?' the courtier said, wide-eyed. 'Tell me, Govinda. Who…who is he? By Jatavedas, now it all makes sense. He alone

could have had the influence it took to get the Secret Keeper to stave off your death. He alone could have brought us to war, and…' Sanjaya shook Govinda in rough earnestness. 'Tell me, Govinda. Who? Who is he?'

'Who is *he*, Sanjaya? Surely, you are being presumptuous, are you not?'

The beginnings of comprehension dawned on Sanjaya. He stared, unseeing, at the rubble around him and then again at Govinda. This time, his eyes held a question.

Govinda shrugged. 'I'll leave you to your conclusions. Now, I believe I am wanted elsewhere, as are you. The King and Queen have decided to retire from worldly affairs. Your father intends to accompany them.'

'As shall I,' Sanjaya said. His voice no longer held defeat; instead, there was acceptance. 'My work is done. Now, I shall spend my days learning all that I failed to despite these years of study.'

'It would be days well spent,' Govinda said wistful. 'For my part, those are luxuries I cannot afford for the time being. There is much to be done. I need to find Asvattama and…'

'Asvattama?' Sanjaya said. 'He is not at Hastina. In fact, he has not been here since the march to Kurukshetra, over eighteen days ago.'

The equanimity on Govinda's face vanished and was replaced instantly with muted trepidation. He left without another word.

3

THE SUN ROSE, LARGE AND RED, IN A HARSH DAWN. FIRES RAGED over the entire expanse of Dharma Yudhisthir's war-camp, and the distinct smell of nitre and burnt flesh filled the air. Once-human figures lay charred and bloodied. Where the blaze had spared flesh and skin, the remnants of the horror that had visited could be seen in the petrified expressions that had frozen on the faces of the dead. Whatever it was that had killed them, it had been a quiet attack, but hardly a quiet end. Soldiers of the same camp lay in positions that suggested they had turned on each other, driven either by suspicion of betrayal or, worse, a trance of terror.

Animals, too, had not been spared. Horses and elephants were stiffened into unnatural positions on their backs; their flailing limbs evidence of a tortured, painful passing. Their bloated bodies burst now and then, adding to the already overwhelming stench of decaying. Underneath the unbearable stink remained a trace of the toxin that had brought things to this – an acrid tang that made no effort to be pleasant.

An eerie creature, once a carrion-eater that had been feasting on horseflesh, was attacking its own. At the sound of the newcomers' footsteps it flew at them, slashing and biting, all beak and talons and madness. Swearing under his breath, Govinda picked up an axe that lay on the ground and brought it down on the bird's neck, setting it free of its hallucinations. That done, he willed his attention to the carnage.

Burnt tents and mangled bodies covered every finger's breadth of the ground. The few soldiers who were alive – those who had been fortunate enough to be away from the camp on some errand or the other – were pulling bodies out of the rubble, but the dead outnumbered the living many

times over. Unearthly screams rang through the camp, in voices that came from neither man nor woman; not even animal.

A dazed survivor, a man who wandered through the destruction, covered unrecognizably in blood that was not his, pointed wordlessly to the centre of the camp, in the direction of a partly burnt tent. Shikandin’s tent.

As one, Govinda as his companions began to run in its direction. Their eyes first fell on Subadra, slumped in the shade of a collapsed canopy. Partha cried out and ran to her, falling to his knees by her side. The others paused to look at each other with dread, and followed. As they neared the tent, as one, they staggered back. The sight that greeted them was worse than anything they had feared or imagined. Despite all the battle and devastation they had seen these past days, nothing compared to what they now felt, the sense of futility and resignation, the hopelessness at the thought that it was not yet over and perhaps could never truly end.

Bhim took one step, and another, before collapsing to his knees where he stood. Sadev began to weep. A ghostly pallor spread over Panchali’s face. She swayed, unsteady on her feet. Govinda caught her just in time. She buried her face in his chest, and her body shook with silent sobs. Dharma retched, Yuyudhana let out a horrified shout, and each one of them let their pain take them, as it inevitably would. At length, knowing that they had no choice but to face the travesty that lay ahead, the companions went forward, the story Bhim leaning on Nakul and Sadev for support.

They entered the tent, or what remained of it, to find Dhaumya was already dosing Subadra with his calming potion. Uttara sat cross-legged and tall in a corner of the tent, as though she ruled over the situation, her stance conveying her apparent cognition of the devastation around her. Yet, her empty, uncomprehending gaze was enough to terrify the onlookers. Nearby were the dead

Yudhamanyu and Uttamaujas had greeted their end together, fighting and falling side by side as brothers. Their open eyes seemed to hold regret, not only for the life as yet not lived as brothers, but also for the past spent in fraternal strife. The two men had clearly been trying to defend young Kshatradharman, their rent skin and gash-covered bodies evidence of their

futile valour. Uttamaujas had died wielding his father's sword; the Panchala emblem on the hilt was now crusted with the forester's dried blood.

Kshatradharman had been more fortunate. Dying in a drugged sleep, he had passed blissfully into the end he had not foreseen. An intricately crafted silver-white dagger ran through his heart, impaling his innocence in the chair he had fallen against. His eyes were closed, and he remained unaware of the depredation, of the depths of human madness that had been on display around him.

Not too far away lay Dhrstyadymn's corpse, clean and bloodless. His face was swollen and grotesque, the bruises around his neck a sign that the assailant had strangled the strong warrior to death with bare hands. None who looked upon his lifeless form could help but be saddened and terrified by the thought that the commander of their forces, a tried and tested warrior, could have been so overcome.

And then there was Shikandin. A gash ran across his chiseled features, splitting his skull into two. The blood had drained out the back of his skull to pool under him, drenching his clothes. His face was pallid, the flesh a lifeless, leathery cover over white bone. Yet, he was inexplicably content in his expression, and his long fingers lay over his heart as though he had died holding in it a cherished thought.

None of the living spoke, lacking utterly the words to frame their rage and grief, or the strength to mourn their loss.

'Who?' Partha finally asked, through clenched teeth.

Dhaumya pointed to the knife in Kshatradharman's chest. 'Asvattama. I suspect Kritavarman and Kripa aided him. They must have poisoned the water, or set a toxin in the air. The soldiers, and your remaining sons, your kinsmen and allies…they died without offering much resistance… But these men…' He nodded at the corpses, 'This wasn't the work of a man. Only a fiend could have done this.'

4

ASVATTAMA WATCHED AS THE BLOOD WASHED OFF HIM, SPREADING into the water in dark, oily circles.

Every day for the past week, he had bathed in this river, the cold, tempestuous waters that ran past the Firstborn hermitage that was home to the Vyasa. Every day, it seemed to go still at his very touch, as though it had lost the will to flow. Every day, he tried to stay under the surface, hoping the cool waters would soothe his battered soul; that he would never have to resurface. And every day he watched as in his mind's eye Shikandin's blood and the blood of the helpless young Kshatradharman drained off his body.

The first time he had waded into the river, Asvattama had stayed in the water for so long that he had nearly frozen – until the Secret Keeper had bodily pulled him out. After that it was the Secret Keeper who greeted Asvattama every morning. He walked with the warrior to the river and sat by its banks for as long as Asvattama stood in its waters. He brought Asvattama his food and clothing, as though he were some menial or a new acolyte, and kept him company as the warrior stared at the night sky, unable to sleep.

On the third day, Asvattama had come out of his hutment and sat silently with the others as they offered their prayers and went through their studies and rituals for the day. The same night, as the Secret Keeper had seen Asvattama to his lodging, the warrior had spoken for the first time since his arrival at the hermitage. He had handed over all his weapons to the scholar and said, 'I don't need these anymore.' The Secret Keeper had taken the offered weapons without a word.

As soon as they had left his keeping, Asvattama had stood taller, as though a heavy burden had lifted off him. He had said, without prelude, ‘Did you know?’

‘What is it you speak of, Asvattama? There are many things I did not know, but now see and understand. It has taken innumerable deaths, and one above all, to bring me to this. The same blood that you try to clean yourself of stains my conscience. You knew it would and that is why you came here – to me. Maybe, if I had seen what it was that Govinda had meant to do… No, let me restate that. I had seen it all along, but for a while there I could not accept it, I could not trust him, not enough.’

‘Do you not wonder, Acharya, why he did not tell you? Why he did not explain?’

The Secret Keeper had appeared uncomfortable but admitted, ‘Because I wouldn’t have agreed with him..’

‘And now? Do you still not agree?’

‘Now it makes no difference. It is done. The inexorable turn of the eternal wheel has brought us to this. It is time for the people of this realm to make their own destiny.’

After that conversation, Asvattama had become one of the scholars at the hermitage, performing chores and saying prayers like any other acolyte. He was no longer Asvattama the unvanquished warrior, or Asvattama, Firstborn faithful and Firewright traitor. He was merely a man.

A condemned man.

He glanced up as one of the young acolytes came running towards the river. ‘They…they’re coming.’

With a sigh, Asvattama rose out of the water, slicking back his long hair. The thought of facing judgement made him weary and tired; the thought of facing death filled him with hope. Throwing a white robe around his wet torso, he made his way towards the edge of the hermitage, and watched as five figures dismounted a respectful distance away from the unmarked perimeter of the hermitage and made their way up the gentle slope of the hillock. Dharma, Bhim and Partha. And, of course, Asvattama observed, Panchali and Govinda.

Chin raised, shoulders broad, Asvattama waited. At the sight of him, Partha sprang forward, shouting, ‘Why you whoring son of a jackal! I’ll flay you alive!’

Bhim cursed and drew his sword.

‘Wait!’ Panchali’s voice rang out. The two men stopped where they were as Panchali went ahead. She and Asvattama studied each other for a while.

Asvattama spoke first. ‘Will you forgive me, Panchali?’

‘It is what my brother would want. But the truth is, Asvattama, there’s nothing to forgive…’

‘I didn’t think I’d kill him, Panchali. I didn’t mean to. We both know what eventually had to happen, but I did not mean for it to happen this way. I was so sure that Shikandin would kill me to protect his brother and his sons but… The next thing I knew, they were all dead. Everything was burning and I…I thought I’d gone mad… But when I came face to face with Uttara, I realized what I had done… I came to my senses before I could hurt her but I fear for her…’

‘Unborn child,’ Govinda completed. Around him, Dharma, Partha and the others started in surprise, but stopped as Govinda gave them a meaningful glance.

Panchali reached out to squeeze Asvattama’s large hands. ‘Hush! This is not your fault. The pain of your loss is no less than mine. We have all done what we believed we must…my brother, included.’ She shivered, despite the pleasant, bracing climate.

Asvattama nodded. ‘And now, Panchali, it is my turn to do what I must.’ He went down on one knee in front of the still-astonished Dharma. ‘I don’t deserve an honourable death. But I ask you in the name of my father, whom I was duty-bound to avenge, to give me a quick end. Please…’

Bhim let out an eager breath, but Dharma waved him back as he moved his hand to his sword, the memory of their burning camp fresh his mind. He stopped as he felt Panchali’s fingers curl around his wrist.

‘Enough death, Dharma! Do you still not understand? Shikandin died, he let his brother, his sons die, so that nothing remained of Panchala’s royal

past. He died so that we, the people, could make this choice for ourselves, and ourselves alone. He set us free.'

Dharma did not respond. Bhim and Partha glared, incredulous. Panchali met their gaze, defying them to argue. It dawned on the two brothers that they had neither words nor thoughts left to spare.

'It's over now, isn't it?' Dharma turned to Govinda, tentative. 'We came here to find Asvattama and we have. It's over now…'

All Govinda said was, 'Come with me.'

Handsome and undeniably radiant, Sukadeva Vashishta Varuni, son of Dwaipayana and the new Vyasa of the Firstborn, towered over the gathered scholars from where he was seated, on a dais under a blossom-laden tree in the small, square clearing that was the heart of the hermitage. The mild sun of the White Mountains beamed through its canopy to cocoon the entire clearing in a gold-green glow. His father, Dwaipayana, was seated next to him, and the acolytes and other residents of the hermitage were gathered around them in a blissful equanimity that was characteristic of this, the most lauded hermitage in all of Aryavarta and the oldest home of the Firstborn.

Yet, even here bliss was fleeting, for at the sight of Govinda and his companions, Dwaipayana clenched his frail, emaciated fingers into fists. He looked as though he were about to speak but decided against it, and his accusatory eyes moved to rest on Govinda alone.

In response, Govinda raised his eyebrows, the gesture clearly a question.

With a sob, the old scholar let his shoulders droop. 'I am told a child was killed. A child! Was that worth it, Govinda? Is there no justice anymore; no divinity worth bowing to? The blessed ones of old spoke of yajna – sacrifice – as the most noble act an Arya could ever hope for. But yajna was more than a ritual offering or a materialistic exchange for favours from the gods. It was an act of self-denial that resulted in piety and preserved Divine Order. What happened to the Divine, Govinda?'

Govinda said, 'The limitation lies not in our language, but in our minds. Yajna is nothing but the transformation of the self. It is giving something

up, yes; for one has to give up ignorance, fear and prejudice. And when we act as one, as this living organism called society, humanity –we are nothing less than the force of the eternal Universe, a playful Primordial Being. If only I could explain to you what a joy it is to wake up from this dream-like state of illusion, then you might see why we fell asleep in the first place…'

Govinda knelt down in front of Dwaipayana and placed his hands on the old man's shoulders, as he would with a grandfather he loved. 'Why is it so difficult to believe in yourself?' he asked. 'Day follows night, and we wouldn't know one without the other. Why must things always be complicated or simple; the truth is they are both. *We* are both! Can't you see who you really are…?'

It appeared to those gathered that the man they saw was not a middle-aged warrior, but a child of six or seven years, his chubby cheeks flushed with excitement, and large, round eyes wide with wonder and joy as he saw the beauty of existence. The world, it seemed– no – the Universe had come alive in Govinda's eyes.

Dwaipayana gaped, ecstatic. 'Who are you, Govinda?' he asked, his eyes brimming, 'Who are you?'

Govinda's reply was to throw his head back and laugh. In the silence that followed, each one found the answer to Dwaipayana's question in their own way.

Dharma spoke, confessing: 'I now understand the riddle that is you, Govinda,' he said, 'though I still do not know the solution to it. But I can now see the purpose of your words and your actions all these years. The point of the war, the point of it all was not to make me and my heirs rulers in perpetuity. My role now is to hold this title in trust for the true emperors and empresses of Aryavarta, till they are ready to stake claim on what has always been theirs. It has taken me long to understand that we – the kings of the realm – were meant to be nothing more than a means to an end… I do not fully know the story of how we usurped the role to become an end in ourselves, but I do not need to know. It is time we faced the future, not leaned on the past. It is time the people became their own sovereign. Is that not what you want, Govinda?'

Govinda said, ‘It is not for me to want or not want, Dharma. Time has brought us to this pass. It is what we, the people, want. Isn’t that so, Acharya?’

Suka’s voice held contentment and confidence. ‘Yes, Govinda.’

5

GOVINDA WAS ADAMANT. HE REFUSED TO GO WITH DHARMA AND his brothers on their new Imperial campaign – a campaign of peaceful conquest, whereby Dharma and his kin spread the idea of a future empire, united, and ruled by the people. Not all parts of the realm had welcomed them or the notion, but for those nations they had words of persuasion spoken by Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa himself: *Kali is upon us*.

For his part, Govinda openly admitted that after the Great War at Kurukshetra, conquest and peace had taken on very different meanings in his mind, and he no longer really cared for Dharma's temporary empire. Aryavarta, he proudly avowed, was already in the throes of change. Nothing could stop the wheels of Time.

There was only one reason Govinda remained at Hastina, and that was to protect Uttara. Govinda had felt a lump in his throat as it dawned on him that Abhimanyu would live on through his son. But when he had seen Dharma and his brothers begin making their plans for the future, it had struck him with cold dread. He had thought out loud of Shikandin, of the Panchala prince's painful solution to the final problem, and prayed that when the time came Dharma Yudhisthir would have the strength to let go of his past legacies.

Panchali alone remained privy to his fears, but could not refrain from adding to them. 'Devala Asita,' she said. 'Remember the night when Abhimanyu was born? We can't run the risk of that happening all over again. Not to mention, we don't know how the poison at our camp site may have affected her…'

Despite the reports from spies that Devala had long left Aryavarta, Govinda had agreed with her. They had to protect Uttara. Together, he, Panchali and the now-recovered Subadra watched over the girl right till she went into labour.

The young mother-to-be smiled at Govinda. ‘I hope he looks like you…’ she said.

‘And I, on the other hand, hope he is handsome!’ Govinda said. ‘Take care of my daughter,’ he told Subadra with mock sternness, and left the room.

The frenzied activity from inside the birthing chamber gave way to an ominous hush. Govinda let out a curse followed by a prayer. With a knock on the door, he made his way into the outer room. Panchali came out from the chamber, looking strained and grim.

Govinda understood. ‘Oh Rudra! And Uttara?’ he asked.

‘She is…alive. I don’t know how to tell her.’

‘Govinda!’ Subadra rushed out holding an unmoving infant in her arms, Dhaumya right behind her. ‘Save him!’ Subadra thrust the child at him. ‘You’re a Wright. I’ve heard you speak of all that you’ve learnt from Ghora, and I’ve kept your confidence all these years. Save him, Govinda!’

‘Govinda?’ Uttara stumbled out of the inner chamber, uncaring of her bloodstained robe.

The matrons bustled around her, ushering her into the room. To everyone’s surprise, she complied without protest. Govinda could hear her voice as she told the nursemaids, ‘I’ll sleep now. My husband trusted Govinda Shauri, as do I. I am not afraid. I’ll sleep now. Wake me when my son needs me.’

A nursemaid tried to explain to Uttara that her son was dead.

‘Dead?’ Uttara sounded far from upset. ‘It doesn’t matter. Govinda lives.’

Outside, Subadra burst into tears. ‘Did you hear that? Did you hear that? What are you waiting for? Stop wasting time! Save him!’

‘I…’ Govinda looked at the stillborn infant. The boy’s resemblance to Abhimanyu was unmistakable. Like his father, the boy would no doubt grow to be a brave, strong, prince.

An Arya. One of those who had ravaged these lands and harnessed its people into submission in the name of hierarchy and Divine Order. Yet another prince, like those who had died on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, those who were the backbone of the system Govinda had destroyed, despite the price he had paid for it.

Govinda reached out with a trembling hand, willing himself to see that it would not end if somehow he could… *No! I must pay the price too, as we all have*.

‘He is the sole heir to the Kuru throne! You must save him!’ Subadra screamed.

‘Don’t you see? That is precisely why I can’t.’

Subadra stared at him, open-mouthed. She was suddenly unsteady on her feet, but Dhaumya grabbed her in time, holding her up. Panchali took the infant, cradling him in one arm. She turned to Govinda, her large, dark eyes willing him to understand her silent plea.

‘Mih!’ Govinda swore and sat down on the edge of a chair. Unable to face any of them, he buried his head in his hands. With a burst of energy, Subadra flew at her brother, punching and swatting him in a pathetic, ineffective rage. Govinda did not move, did not squirm. Finally, Subadra gave up and fell at his feet, sobbing. Govinda made to place a consoling hand on her, but she pushed him away.

‘Don’t touch me!’ she snapped.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said and turned away, only to meet Panchali’s gaze. He waited for her outburst, but it did not come.

‘Save him, Govinda,’ Panchali said.

He shook his head.

‘Save him.’

‘It’s no use, Panchali,’ Subadra began.

Panchali ignored her and continued to address Govinda. ‘I understand why you refuse, Govinda. It amazes me that any man can have the

conviction that you do, to look beyond himself, his family … I understand you and that's why I say this: Save him, Govinda. Don't deny him life, as his ancestors denied millions their humanity…'

'Panchali…'

'*You are life*, Govinda.' Panchali placed the unmoving child on Govinda's lap. She took Govinda's hands and guided them to the child's body. 'I do not remember clearly,' she said, 'but I think we once spoke of the magic in the human heart….'

Govinda closed his eyes. His thoughts he kept to himself but at length he looked up, first at Panchali and then, with unrestrained affection, at the child.

'This isn't magic,' Govinda began, 'no more than the life-force that runs within us is magical, no more than life itself is magical. Blood, flesh and organs driven by the heart, mind and soul – the power of the creator… perhaps that feels magical. But the true magic here is the hope that this newborn feels his will to live, to laugh and love… I am but an instrument. Like us all, this child is the essence of the Eternal. He must decide for himself whether he will live.'

Using his fingers, Govinda measured down from the child's neck, to a precise point on the infant's chest. Frowning with concentration, he placed his hands over the child's heart. Panchali knelt down in front of him, adding her palms over his. She did not know who spoke, her or Govinda, or neither, but the words seemed to come from within her ears, not fall on them. A gentle chant:

A fist-length below the neck
lies a budding lotus-bloom,
inverted, inward-looking,
This is the human heart.
It beats incessant,
fed by life-giving blood.
It is the corporeal home of
the incorporeal soul,

the core of the divine
light within us.

Govinda's hands pressed down in a clear rhythmic sequence.

Panchali's eyes widened with fear. 'There is no beat…' she said, desolate. Subadra began to whimper.

'Our hearts beat,' Govinda said, 'because we are alive. But that beat isn't life itself. Nara-ayana, the same endless potential, is life. If the fire of life burns within this boy, his heart will beat.'

The words made sense in a way that Panchali did not understand, but knew to be true. She felt herself growing calmer by the moment, joyful even. It was as though Govinda held the throbbing energy of the Universe in his power. She imagined she saw a dazzling flash, the spark so flippantly referred to as life. As she watched, the glow, this throbbing pulse of energy grew into a fiery orb, illuminating her from within.

We are not slaves to a soulless, mechanical system of life and death. We are the creators, the golden womb of all life and energy.

An explosion of knowing cut through everything. Panchali watched as the cloak of ignorance and death that surrounded the infant in Govinda's lap was shattered. The pieces flew around her, spinning in a rainbow of colours, before settling into the golden flame that emanated from her, from them. All darkness dissolved into that all-encompassing light.

'Oh!' she exclaimed out loud, as she felt a faint tremor, a throb under her fingers. 'Oh Rudra!' she gasped again. The child remained still under her touch, but now Panchali had no doubt. A tiny but strong pulse beat against her palm. 'Govinda…'

Govinda leant down over the child to blow into his tiny mouth. Panchali could feel the boy's chest heave as air filled his lungs.

'Breathe, my son,' Govinda urged. 'Breathe and you'll see that life and death are but illusions. You are eternal, a part all existence. Look around you and feel the joy of Oneness. Look, my son! Breathe!'

With a loud, hearty cry, the boy complied.

Dharma and his brothers were welcomed at Indr-prastha by the newborn crown prince, whom Govinda had named Parikshith – the effulgence of life. That night, no one slept, except for Govinda and the newborn. The others sat as they were, watching the boy and the man in deep slumber next to each other. None could bear to be away from either of them for an instant.

The days passed in content, companionable togetherness till it was time for Dharma's coronation, once again, as the Emperor of Aryavarta, a title he took on knowing full well that it was a transient one, a precursor to a formal rule of the people. Suka, Dwaipayana's son, performed the rites as a frail Dwaipayana watched from his seat of honour.

Govinda spoke once during the entire ceremony, when Yuyudhana hoarsely observed, 'Shikandin and Dhrstyadymn would have been delighted…'

'Yes,' was all Govinda said.

And then it was time to go home.

Govinda chose a fine summer's day to leave Indr-prastha. Dawn brought the glorious promise of a golden future, the red warmth of plenty and the clean, fresh smell of freedom. Yet those who had travelled the long road to this point in time went forth with heavy hearts.

Subadra cried like a child, begging Govinda and Balabadra to take her with them. She relented after Partha promised her that they would soon visit Dwaraka.

'Truth be told, Govinda,' Partha confessed, 'I'm just as unwilling to let you go. Can't you stay longer? Please? We all need you, especially little Parikshith here.'

Govinda said, 'I can't, Partha. There is one last loose end to tie up before this tale of the Kurus comes to an end, and we can unleash this little rascal on all Aryavarta,' he said, stroking Parikshith with his finger.

The child wriggled with glee and wrapped his tiny fist around Govinda's finger.

'See?' Partha pointed out. 'Even he tells you to stay. And you plan to run off to who knows which corner of the world…'

‘I plan to go nowhere, Partha. This loose end will come looking for me, and soon.’

Tearful, they said their final goodbyes. Panchali did not cry. After all these years, all the meetings and partings, she felt numb. Instinct told her that it would be a long time before she saw Govinda again, if she ever did, but it did not matter. She felt too full, too saturated with emotion, to feel anything anymore.

‘Goodbye, Govinda.’

‘Goodbye, Empress.’ Govinda gazed long at her, drinking deep from her dark eyes. He left Indr-prastha without looking back.

Dharma and the others waited till the departing company could no longer be seen in the distance, and then began to disperse. Some left alone, tearful, while others wandered off in twos and threes, with wistful talks of the good old times. Panchali remained with him. They were finally alone, and it was time.

‘That day,’ Dharma began, ‘that day, at the dice game…Panchali, I need to know – why did you call out to Govinda? Why did you call out his name?’

Panchali felt a storm of sentiments well up inside her, but it died, defeated by her tired numbness. For so long now, this matter had stood between her and Dharma; it had been the reason why so much had happened. She had lost count of the times she had longed to explain, or prayed that Dharma would ask her the question and so set her free of the burden of guilt he had implicitly laid on her. To the Emperor, it had little to do with fidelity and trust, and everything to do with duty. The duty that had been destined to her as daughter, as wife, princess and queen.

As Arya.

She turned to face Dharma. Age showed on him, in the lines of his face, his rounded back. *A lifetime spent defending this system, and even now he doesn’t understand that it has crumbled to nothing around him. Dharma, Emperor of Aryavarta*.

Panchali felt her heart go out to her husband, and she thought to explain, to tell him that beyond his tiny, constricted notions of duty and destiny was a greater cause – humanity. She wanted to shout out loud that to call out Govinda's name had been to reach out for that spark of humanity within her, to find herself, not him, for such was their relationship – nameless, formless and beyond judgements of propriety and purity, forged in the fire of sacrifice and burnt to cinders in those same flames.

But, Panchali realized, Dharma would not understand. He had accepted that it was his task now to pass on the reins of power to the people, to change the world as he knew it, but he would never fully comprehend why he did it all. In its own way, that was his redemption.

With a sad smile, Panchali gave him the only answer he could accept.

'Destiny, Dharma. It was destiny.'

6

ALL THESE YEARS, AND IT STILL DOES NOT END.

Balabadra Rauhineya, leader of the Federation of Yadu Nations at Dwaraka, was a veteran of numerous battles, a man who had gazed on the carnage at Kuru's Fields with sadness and disgust, but without fear. Yet, as he stared at the smouldering rubble of what had, not too long ago, been the Yadu garrison of Prabhasa, he felt too old, too tired and too broken to find courage or acceptance within. He was also too weary to deny the singular fact that he had either failed to notice, or had not needed to see, that Govinda Shauri too was now an old man.

Balabadra took a step towards his brother, glancing down as something squelched underfoot. He cried out, the sound becoming halfway an instinctive retch. Entrails coated his toes; the smell of human waste and precious flesh mingled in an indiscernible reek to reach his nose. Balabadra was glad that the man's face had been crushed to nothingness, and he did not know whose corpse it was he had trampled on.

Can curses come true, he wondered, his mind searching for a grip on the unacceptable reality around him. Govinda had told him of the words Gandhari spoke when he had met her after the battle of Kurukshetra. Many years had passed; Dharma Yudhisthir held, in trust for the people, the title of Emperor of Aryavarta. His grandson, Parikshith, was now a young man. Gandhari, Dhritarastra, Vidur and Pritha were dead, Sanjaya had settled into quiet seclusion at Dwaipayana's hermitage, and Devala had not been seen or heard of again in all Aryavarta. Kritavarman – the only Yadu to have fought for Syoddhan and survived – seemed to have forgotten his wounds, physical and emotional, from the war. But as Balabadra saw the bodies of

his kinsmen, slain in the thousands and in so heinous a manner, he could not help but think that some wounds could not be healed after all. In a way, the Queen's enraged words had indeed borne true.

'Govinda…' Balabadra called out. He needed the sanity that his brother alone could provide, though it was a madness of its own kind.

Govinda said, 'It was a trap, Agraja. They were brought here and ambushed. I told Yuyudhana that I had misgivings, but it is my fault that I did not insist. I suppose a part of me hoped that Kritavarman had truly got over the past, both the events of our youth as well as all that happened during the Great War.'

'Kritavarman never forgave Yuyudhana for taking your side during the Great War; nor could he forget the death of his friends and kinsmen at Yuyudhana's hands. But why kill so many, just for vengeance against one man?'

'That is what I want to know…and I think I've found the answer,' Govinda said, bending down to turn over a partly crushed body. 'Kritavarman lies here with the rest of them. Either he failed to get away in time or he was led into the very trap he had set by one who wants vengeance against us all…'

'Devala!' Balabadra spat out.

'Yes. Devala. It would have also been a simple plan to suggest to Kritavarman, yet one that Devala could twist to his own needs. Already the garrison housed the men on armed forces duty; the leaders alone had been missing. Kritavarman's invitation brought them and their personal guard here, right into Devala's grasp. What men he didn't kill with his explosions would have probably died fighting each other.' With that he picked up a blood-stained sword.

'No!' Balabadra cried out, recognizing it as Pradymna's. He began looking around for his nephew, holding an untenable hope that he was alive.

Govinda ignored him, lost in thought. Out loud he said, 'But why here, why at Prabhasa and not Dwaraka? Unless…'

'What…?' Balabadra spun around.

Govinda moved swiftly to recover a bow and a partly damaged quiver of arrows from the dead grasp of a Narayaniya commander. He pulled out a vellum-wrapped coil of bowstring from his waist sash and proceeded to string the weapon.

‘Are you mad?’ Balabadra said. Still Govinda did not respond. It soon became clear why.

The incessant sea-breeze had cleared the smoke and Balabadra saw men pouring out of the woods. ‘Mercenaries!’ he growled, but renewed his objection nevertheless. ‘There’s not enough time, Govinda! Let it be…’

Rummaging around on the ground at his feet, Balabadra found a bar of hard iron – a pestle that had been used, in all probability, to pound spices to flavour wine. He picked it up. The mercenaries were closer now, advancing without hesitation. Two badly armed men against fifty or so were hardly reason to pause.

‘Govinda!’ Balabadra shouted. His brother was still engaged in fitting the string without hurry, as though he were on a pleasant hunt. Balabadra’s grip on the rod tightened and he swung with all his might as the first of the enemy attacked. He fought like a demon and soon had four men down, but two had already got past him and were almost upon Govinda. Balabadra was too far away to stop them.

‘No!’ he yelled, as one of the mercenaries raised his sword to strike. Govinda had not even glanced up.

The bow sang twice, two arrows flying from it in quick succession. Govinda did not wait. He advanced as the two dead soldiers hit the ground, taking aim at those further away. With unerring precision, he swatted down the enemy, arrow after arrow flying off the string. A reassured Balabadra continued to swing his weapon, bringing down every man within his reach, till he heard the enemy sound a retreat.

It was again just the two of them, surrounded by blood and ruin.

‘They will strike again,’ Govinda said. ‘We’ve hardly killed a fourth of their numbers; they are simply being cautious.’

‘Let them come. We’ll kill them all!’

‘No, Agraja, we don’t have much time…’ Govinda’s even tone belied the urgency in his eyes. ‘We’ve got to get back. Dwaraka is in terrible danger…’

Balabadra stood where he was, stunned senseless.

‘Agraja, please,’ Govinda was now firm. ‘We must go now. The target was not the armies alone.’

Balabadra slowly stirred as he heard a shrill horn. More soldiers emerged from the woods for an offensive, their depleted numbers now replenished by a waiting rearguard. This time, it would be a battle to the end. ‘Go,’ he said.

It was Govinda’s turn to be astonished. ‘What?’

‘Go, brother. Ride fast.’

Govinda did not move. Balabadra glared at him, willing him to understand. He had lost the will to live, the will to fight. He finally saw what they had become, driven by their pride, the intoxication of victory and success. In his own way, Balabadra accepted, he was a tyrant – a benevolent one possibly, but a tyrant all the same. From the pinnacles of Dwaraka he had looked down over land and sea, dictating what he thought was fair and good. He had not been wrong, he had not been cruel. But that was irrelevant. Like all those Govinda had destroyed, Balabadra too was a part of the decaying system that had to be uprooted to make way for change. *Someday*, Govinda had said, *I may even ask you to spill the blood of those you love the most, to destroy everything… Trust me, brother…*

It was time.

If only, he noted, it were that easy. Balabadra looked at Govinda with unfettered affection. ‘Once more, you must run, isn’t it? Once more, you will place the lives of others before your honour. Poor Govinda! Have I failed to protect you, as I ought to have, little one? How many times I have wondered what my role in all this has been. Does your victory lie as blame on my head? Or have I been so selfish that I thought of myself alone, and not of you and your pain…’

Govinda turned, wide-eyed, to his brother. ‘Agraja…’ he began, but he had no words to go on.

‘Go,’ Balabadra repeated, this time gentle.

Govinda nodded. And then he was gone.

Alone, the burly wrestler got set to face the advancing soldiers. His mind was now at ease and the thrill of battle was upon him as he poised himself, feet firm on the ground, the iron pestle ready and swinging from his hand. Seeing that he was alone, the mercenaries rushed at him as one. With a blood-curdling yell Balabadra fell upon them, swinging the pestle right into the face of his attackers; grunting in satisfaction as the heavy rod smashed into the men’s skulls. His brute strength was enough to allow him to kill with a single blow. But for each man who went down, three more seemed to spring out of the earth. He was surrounded, outnumbered beyond hope. No matter, he told himself, he was ready to die.

It was as if someone had heard him speak the words aloud. A long-tipped spear ran through his gut with a searing pain. Balabadra staggered back only to receive a heavy blow from a mace. He could taste blood and bile in his mouth, and his vision blurred. This was it. With a soft smile, he let the pestle fall from his hand. He felt no pain as more blows rained on him nor did he feel the sword as it cleaved off his right arm.

Balabadra dropped to his knees. He imagined he saw his life, his soul, ebbing out of him and spiralling, snake-like, towards the sky, a golden mist merging into the blue sky above him – blue and clear like a fine summer day. A perfect day to take the cows out to pasture. To lie on the lush grass, listening to Govinda play on his flute; to be lulled to sleep by the potent fragrance from the blossoming trees and the shimmering haze of afternoon as Govinda dutifully rubbed his feet.

He had loved no one and cherished nothing – not his wife, nor his children – as he had Govinda. Now, he understood why as suddenly, he was elsewhere, in a place that was neither memory nor imagination.

A place where Time stood still, forever paused at the most precious of moments.

He watched, as a golden-skinned boy came running up to a woman. At her instructions, the boy held his arms out to receive the treasure she gave him. To Balabadra’s surprise, it was not the boy he had once been, but the

man he was now, who gazed, adoring, at the dark-eyed, day-old infant in his arms.

‘Narayana,’ he whispered. Content beyond measure at the life that had been his, Balabadra let himself fall.

7

THERE WAS NOTHING BUT THE BLINDING, BLAZING SUN. THE brightness was beyond bearing; all Govinda could see was the endless golden shimmer of sandy shores. And then a glimpse of the blue sea beyond and the crystal turrets of Dwaraka rose on the horizon.

Govinda heaved a sigh of relief and urged on Sugreev, youngest and sole survivor of his four horse-brothers, with urgent words, coaxing every bit of speed he could out of the stallion. The air was unusually still; the breeze that usually blew in from the sea had ebbed. No birds sang, no trees rustled. All Govinda could hear was the hard ground beneath Sugreev's feet and the sound of his own breath.

Finally, he was at the city. 'Get everyone out. Now!' he shouted to the guards at the main gate. 'And find me Daruka. I'll be at the waterside gates.'

Riding further into the city, Govinda smiled his reassurances at those he passed while firmly instructing them to leave at once. Despite his casual tone, his directive made panic inevitable. The people clung to him, his horse, believing that he would keep them safe. 'You cannot stay. If you trust me, leave now,' he told them.

But they did not, would not, go. The crowd around him grew, swelling quickly to a mob. Govinda swung off his horse and thundered up the circular stairs to reach the turret of a watchtower overlooking Sudharma – the huge hall that was the very heart of Dwaraka and all that it stood for.

'My fellow citizens,' he called out, as thousands of fear-stricken faces turned towards him. They waited, urging silence amongst themselves in anticipation of Govinda's words but there was no charming rhetoric, no

deep booming voice that had for years spurred them higher. This was a fleeting, wistful Govinda Shauri. His eyes filled with a soft, knowing warmth, he said, ‘If you love me… If you believe that I have loved you and done what is right by you all, please leave now. Do not linger on the shores; head further inland. Daruka and Raivati will meet you on the plains at the base of the Raivata mountains and tell you what is to be done next. Go now, and know that I’ll always be there…’

At first, the stillness of disbelief descended over the people. It soon settled into solemn resignation. They began to disperse, some taking Govinda’s words to heart to set off at once, rallying family and friends as they left. Others shuffled away with occasional backward glances at Govinda, still a little unsure. Many felt sadness; a few felt fear. None stopped to argue or defy his instructions.

Govinda watched them till he was sure that the people did indeed mean to leave the city and then, climbing down from the turret, made his way through the crowds to where he’d left Sugreev. ‘Here,’ he thrust the horse’s reins into the hands of a youth standing nearby. ‘Take him with you.’

Govinda’s eyes filled with tears as he nuzzled his beloved horse one last time and let Sugreev lick his face to his heart’s content. ‘Goodbye, old friend,’ he said, and set boy and horse off with a pat each.

He went deeper into Dwaraka, following a scarcely used path, which wound downhill towards the lowest levels of the city. Govinda sprinted down the cobbled lane as fast as he could; noting with satisfaction that the clamour and noise of confused mobs and panicked crowds was dying down. Soon, the city would be empty. He only hoped that it would be soon enough. By the time Govinda reached the water-gates, Daruka was waiting. ‘What’s wrong, Commander?’ the captain asked.

Govinda quickly told him all that had happened.

‘Balabadra?’ Daruka asked, wide-eyed.

‘He’s probably dead by now… But we don’t have time for all that. Look, Daruka, I need you to get the people out, keep them safe. Send word to Hastina. Partha and Panchali will come for sure, maybe Dharma will too. They’ll know what to do. Send word, and meanwhile, keep the people safe.’

‘And when do I bring the people back into the city?’

Govinda said nothing, but pulled Daruka into a quick embrace. ‘Go now. The people need you.’

Govinda’s words held a finality that Daruka did not have the will to dispute. He bowed deep, as he had not in years; not since the day a young prince had shown him that there was no such thing as servitude. With a last look at his beloved commander, Daruka left.

Govinda watched till the captain had disappeared from view, and then made his way down some stairs till he was at the water’s edge. Barriers and seawalls diminished the force of the ocean’s mighty waves, and here the water lapped gently against the lowest walls that bounded Dwaraka. Set into such a wall was a heavy door, its hardly used wood and metal crusted over with the moss and seashells of years. Behind the doorway lay a narrow stairway that led down to the deepest levels of the island city – its underwater foundations.

Govinda took out a key from his waistband, an old, dark piece of metal, one of a set of two that would open the door. The door, however, was already open. No doubt, whoever had entered earlier had got the key from the captain of the city guard – not that the captain was a traitor, but dead men were in no position to oppose their assailants. Govinda pursed his lips, reluctantly admitting to himself that the plan had been well executed. But this was not the time for reflection or reprimand, and he thundered down the stairs, unheeding of the dark.

‘Arrgh!’ Govinda exclaimed as the flare of light burst on him. He was momentarily blinded, and a searing pain shot through his head. Breathing deep, he willed himself to wait till it passed, as he well knew it would. At length, he opened his eyes and squinted around through the blur of tears.

‘Well chosen,’ Govinda said, looking around by the glow of the flare in Devala Asita’s hand. The floor around them was covered with black nitre. Huge piles of nitre had also been stacked near the massive pillars that formed the foundation of the city above. The beams and cornices that supported the weight of Dwaraka too were connected by nitre-coated ropes.

It was as he had expected. ‘Really,’ he said, ‘it’s quite impressive. You’ve thought it through well…’

‘Shut up, Govinda! Have the humility to accept defeat when it stares you in the face.’

‘Defeat? I didn’t know I was in a fight, Devala. Why the talk of victory and defeat?’

‘How low will you stoop to defend yourself, your pride?’ Devala hissed. ‘Don’t you see what your precious revolution has done? By destroying the system that has supported us, helped us survive for generations, you have weakened us beyond measure. We are defenceless, Govinda, against the world, against ourselves. Remember, Aryavarta is but half of Jambudvipa, which itself is but one of the seven continents of this earth. The Yavanas will, sooner or later, attack us and it won’t be a tiny skirmish. The Danavas and other foreign nations too will probably join them. Your *Empire* will soon cease to exist. Aryavarta will be conquered – and for that I blame you! Destiny is a Firstborn word, Govinda, but if it holds true, then clearly you were born to end this age. You are the demon that has destroyed us all, and I’ll be the one who ended your bloody slaughter.’

‘My, my! A Firewright whose faith in magic is stronger than his faith in science. What sort of loyalty is that, Devala?’

Devala was enraged, but kept his voice toneless. ‘Thank you for your thoughts, though I find them childish and ridiculous. Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s much left for me to do… I hope you see what you’ve brought on your own people. Your precious city, the city you’ve built, filled with hopes and dreams of…what was it? Ah yes, the people’s rule…Well, this city shall fall. You can’t stop it!’

‘Where you see that this city will fall,’ Govinda said, ‘I see that a new world will rise on its rubble. The Eternal Universe knows no coincidences… but I’ve said that far too many times already, and I’m bored of hearing it… Let’s finish this!’ He drew his sword.

Devala shouted with anticipation, ‘I’ve waited for years for this, Govinda. Decades! Come, let me have the satisfaction of avenging all those who have died to satisfy your bloodlust!’ He threw his burning brand from

his sword-hand to the other and pulled out a shiny, sharp weapon from the scabbard at his waist.

‘Remember this blade, Govinda? Ghora Angirasa wore one like it once, as did his son and grandson… and his great grandson…’

‘Yes, and they all gave it up for a greater cause…’

‘There is no greater cause to me than your death! Yeeaargh!’ Devala rushed at Govinda.

Their swords met with a deafening clang.

Govinda was, by all expectations, the better warrior, but Devala fought with malice, which gave him an inhuman strength. His sharp sword caught Govinda on the side of his arm, and would have severed the limb had Govinda not dodged in time.

Govinda struck back, but in his haste he caught the Firewright with the flat of his sword, rather than the edge. Devala grunted with the pain of the stroke, but it quickly passed. He slashed at Govinda with the flaming brand, causing the warrior to stumble. Making good on the opportunity, Devala brought the brand up to his mouth and blew. A blast of fire made its way towards Govinda. It did not burn him, but he was again blinded by the fierce glare. Devala used the opportunity to land a powerful kick on Govinda’s chest before bringing the brand down in a backhanded swing, landing a blow to his neck.

‘You keep spouting all that stuff about Time… It’s time now, Govinda. It’s time for you and your city to be destroyed. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.’

With a wild yell, Devala brought his sword down in a killing strike. But this time Govinda was ready. He bounded up on to his feet and, with both hands, drove his sword straight into Devala’s unprotected chest, pushing, running the bald man up against the wall.

Devala’s sword fell from his grip; he tried desperately to fend off Govinda with his bare hands. With a grunt of exertion, Govinda pushed further, the sheer force of his blow burying the end of his blade in the stone. And then he let go. The gleaming metal pinned the Firewright to the wall and he thrashed about in mid-air, suspended helpless above the nitre he had

so eagerly laid out. In a desperate attempt, Devala tried to throw the flaming torch down into the nitre. Govinda caught the brand as it fell from Devala's weak grasp. Panting from the effort, he stepped back and studied the defeated man. Devala writhed and flailed, tears streaming from his eyes.

Govinda recognized them as tears of defeat and not pain. He was moved by the agony he was sure Devala felt, and was driven to explain, 'You don't understand, Devala. I don't want to stop you. I have always known, since the moment I laid the foundations of Dwaraka, that I'd someday have to destroy it. I suppose that is why I let it be so beautiful, so magnificent, because it was a fleeting thing…'

The words spurred Devala's anger. Gritting his teeth, he found the will to retort, 'You couldn't bear to let anything of Firewright make endure, could you? Why did you hate us so, Govinda? Was it because of *her*, because you could not have the woman you loved? Why make Dwaraka the repository of every Firewright secret and now destroy it?'

'Why do *you* destroy it, Devala, if you believe it to be the respository of Firewright knowledge?'

'Because…' The bald man's voice began to falter as strength ebbed from his dying body. 'Be…because, I'd rather our legacy was reduced…to nothing than let it fall into the hands of the Firstborn… But…but what would a traitor…like you understand of these matters?'

Govinda sighed. 'Again, we come back to the same old story. Treachery and rivalry, Firewright against the Firstborn. By the flames of Agni, I am tired of these squabbles. And that is why I've done all that I have done. But if you have come this far along and still don't understand, I doubt further explanation shall suffice. But I shall tell you this, more for my vanity's sake than for your wisdom: I do not destroy Firewright knowledge, I would not. You are not the only one who believes Dwaraka to be a hidden hoard of Firewright treasures, like Indr-prastha. If left long enough, that belief will become legend and myth. Myths have a way of surviving, of returning to haunt us. Who knows what wars will be fought over and over for treasures that may or may not exist. But, most of all, the rivalries will survive. No, this needs to end with us. Indr-prastha will fall of its own accord and very

soon, but my people are a stubborn lot, Devala. I shall have to destroy Dwaraka. If not, it will be the same story all over again: yet another upstart king who builds a system to justify his control of all martial and scientific power, and yet another tale of hierarchies and battles and political power-mongering.'

'Despite…all your posturing,' Devala said, blood oozing from his mouth with every word, 'you don't want any…anyone to have what you… c-c-cannot, did not. It makes us quite the same, Govinda.'

'On the contrary, Devala. I want everyone to have what I did. Our knowledge shall now belong to the people of Aryavarta. That was the final task left to the Secret Keeper, and it is now done. I do not, cannot destroy Firewright knowledge. It is now safe where none will look for it, for better or worse.'

'Stop talking and be…be…done with it, you sentimental fool.'

'Sentimental? Yes, I suppose. You see, I stopped you only to give the people time to get of out the city. As for rock and stone…'

Devala's bulging eyes strained; he glared, distrustful, at Govinda, and then screamed out loud as he realized he had failed, after all.

Govinda Shauri, Commander of Dwaraka, raised his torch and said an age-old prayer to Agni, the God of Fire and first of the Firewrights. Laughing, he thrust the torch into a nearby heap of nitre.

The explosion rumbled through the foundations of Dwaraka.

On the shore, people screamed, terrified as the earth shuddered, and the ground beneath their feet splintered and cracked, threatening to open up and swallow them.

The shaking stopped. There was an instant of tranquility, in which even the waves were muted. And then, as the citizens of Dwaraka watched, the sea withdrew from the shore with a huge, sucking sound to reveal the rocky shoals and shards that had lain underwater for centuries, the very fleshless skeleton of the earth itself. For the first time, the people saw the huge mountain on which Dwaraka rested. The little island they had lived on all these years was the tip of a huge monolith that rose from the seabed.

A loud crash sounded as the promontory crumbled to nothing and a vast fissure opened up, shooting across the floor of the sea. Slowly, gracefully, the crystal towers of Dwaraka, its gardens and buildings, courtyards and gem-studded pavilions all fell into the waiting womb of the earth.

A cry of woe arose, turning into screams of terror as a huge wave, as high as the towers of the city, made its way from the depths of the ocean. Some people tried to run, while others stood numb and petrified, watching this frightening but wondrous spectacle.

Just as it seemed that the wave would hit the shore, its waters curved, forming a huge, swirling wall, hundreds of feet high. Rock and debris floated in its strong embrace like bits of wood and straw. The wave rose higher still, as though towering in a salute to the city that had stood there. With a deafening sound, it crashed down on to the seabed and died.

Moments later, a languid sea edged back towards the shore and foam-flecked waters once again teased the golden sands of the beach. The call of seagulls, the chirping of sparrows and the bracing caress of the sea breeze filled the air. The eternal ocean continued to wash against the everlasting earth.

But Dwaraka was gone.

8

THE WAVES THAT LAPPED AGAINST THE SHORE WERE PEACEFUL; their wrath was now exhausted. But the incessant rhythm of ebb and flow now seemed to have a tone of arrogance, as if the sea knew that she was inexorable. Barely days after Dwaraka had crumbled, Panchali stood on what had once been the mainland, watching the waves rise and fall, trying not to think, trying not to look. Nothing remained of the mighty city except for the shattered stones that had been washed ashore by the tide. That, and the devastated survivors.

In the aftermath of the calamity, Daruka and Raivati had worked incessantly, trying to rally their fellow citizens, to somehow get the people through the day. That was till Partha and his men had brought back Balabadra's body from the bloody fields of Prabhasa. After that Raivati had lost all strength and courage, becoming merely one more in the mass of bereaved survivors.

Daruka had managed to take stock of what food was left in the granaries farther inland. The herds in the grasslands bordering the mountains had survived, as had those who tended to them. Survivors from all along the coast, as well as those of the nation of Dwaraka who did not live on the island – herdsmen, farmers, and their families – had gathered at what used to be their capital city's shores. Men and women of the wandering Abhir tribes, survivors of the huge waves that had swept ashore leagues north of Dwaraka, had made their way south in search of safety and shelter. There was little of the latter, for it would take much effort to rebuild the city, bring in the least semblance of order and civilization. For now, it was all they

could do to build pyre after pyre and cremate their dead. Anything more would take courage and hope.

Hope. The one man who could give them that was… Panchali refused to entertain the end of that thought. It could not be. It simply could not be.

'Panchali…' Partha called out to her.

She met his eyes, dreading the worst.

'We can't find him. The last of the bodies trapped in the debris have been moved. Divers have checked under the water, and men have gone up and down the coastline for great distances…. We can't find him…'

Panchali looked away, gazing at the endless sea in front of her.

It can't be! He is Narayana, the one who rests on the Eternal Ocean, these waves can't harm him!

'He is dead, Panchali,' Partha said, his voice trembling. 'Govinda is dead.'

Panchali felt her breath come in a gasp, as it hit her, as Partha repeated the words over and over, as she saw the devastation around her for what it was and heard the wailing, the screams of sorrow and pain. She wanted to add her own screams to that universe of agony, but did not.

'Men die, Partha,' she slowly said. 'Men die. Not legends.'

'Panchali….'

'Look!' she grabbed his arm and made him face the remains of the tragedy. 'Look, he's everywhere…' she said, smiling and crying at once.

And Partha saw. He saw the earth, fresh and full of life; the ocean replete with joy and energy. Two strangers, the young son of a Yadu nobleman and a wandering tribal, worked side by side, building such shelters as they could. He saw mothers and fathers feeding infants that were not theirs. He saw children running to play among the very waves that had left them destitute. He saw hope, the irrepressible force inside them all that gave them the will to survive, to believe that some day they would all be happy and prosperous once again.

He turned back to Panchali, tears running down his cheeks. She squeezed his hand in reassurance. Letting her own tears fall, Panchali closed her eyes, remembering the day Govinda had stood in front of their

armies, his arms open, his head thrown back and curly hair blowing in the wind.

Remember me! Remember Govinda! I am the Eternal Being that shines within each one of you.

In a voice that was strong and undeniably proud, the Empress of Aryavarta declared, ‘We will rebuild this city. We will rebuild it and at its heart will stand a temple, a magnificent temple…’ She faltered, and then found the words she truly sought. ‘We will rebuild this city, for as Time destroys it also births resurrection, and we are but instruments of Time. And yes, there shall be a temple within, a temple enshrined in the hearts and minds of the people, a temple of ideas, of freedom from hierarchy and destiny, of freedom to choose, freedom to rule one’s self. And it won’t matter if waves tear the city down or wars rip apart this realm because what prevails, what matters, is who we truly are: humanity.’

Panchali felt the conviction of words warm her heart, heal her. She knew with certainty now that no matter how many times Dwaraka fell, no matter how many times Aryavarta itself shattered into pieces, or the very earth was destroyed, it would all be built again. Govinda would live. Mothers would suckle him as their son, their eyes filled with dreams of the future, and children would find in him their mischievous playmate, the promise of innocence forever. He would be the sacred lover, the loyal friend, loving companion, and defiant cowherd. Uncrowned, he would be the people’s king.

There could be no greater hope.

Antha
The Resolution

NEARLY FIFTY YEARS SINCE THE GREAT WAR, THE CONCLAVE AT Naimisha was almost at its end. Ugrasravas Sauti finished a tale as he had heard it told to King Janamejaya, son of King Parikshith of the Kurus. Now a solemn quiet rested over them all. The hundreds of scholar-seers gathered felt the beginnings of weariness, the poignant and content melancholy of knowing that a huge task had been done.

The Vyasa, however, felt more melancholy and less content. He was one of oldest at the gathering, the last survivor amongst those who had been a part of the tale of the war. His time, too, would soon be up. He did not fear death, none of them did. But he feared failure. He was afraid to let down the man who had trusted him with the Truth. It was that fear that weighed as silence, over him and over them all.

A young scholar, his eyes sparkling with amusement, was the first to speak. ‘It is interesting to hear this version of events. I’ve travelled widely among the people of the southern lands, and the tale I’ve heard there is… Well, it’s different!’

A muted, but hearty laugh followed, as each scholar thought about the numerous rumours, ranging from the incredible to the ridiculous that had taken hold in but one generation.

‘Be that as it may,’ an older man intervened, ‘you must admit this has its benefits. What better way to preserve the story than to make it…shall we say, scintillating?’

A third scholar, a woman, began, ‘But, is it the truth? Few witnessed what happened, though it was just two or three generations ago. Fewer still were those who heard the story as it was set down by Krishna Dwaipayana, and of those only one now remains alive…’

As one, all eyes turned to the Vyasa.

‘What shall we do now, Acharya?’ Saunuka, the Vyasa’s dear friend and his second, asked.

What shall we do now?

The question had tormented the Vyasa for years. His father had kept his vengeful promise to Govinda, setting down the story as one of destiny and not of humanity, but Vyasa Sukadeva Vasishta Varuni had not felt beholden to that, especially since he had known this day would come: The inevitable Conclave of Seers that took place at least once in each Vyasa's lifetime. It would be his chance to set things right. That is, if he could be sure what to do. Time and again, he had searched the depths of his soul for the answer. It was always the same; the answer that he had been given years ago, not long after Dwaraka had fallen.

'The Books of Knowledge are nearly complete,' Govinda had said, gleefully going through the Vyasa's scrolls. 'Every piece of Firewright lore, every formula or method or discovery that the Wrights knew of, is now part of Firstborn scripture. The task that was left to the Secret Keeper is now complete and Time, inexorable Time, shall do the rest. Knowledge is not what is written, it is what is lived. Years from now, people won't know the difference between Firstborn and Firewright. It is the future we must think about now, Acharya, not the past. History protects tragedies better than it does tales with happy endings and there is no bigger human tragedy than unrequited love. Let your father's words remain as they are. Let the story remain as he has deemed it fit to be told: a story of duty and divinity, not of Firewright and Firstborn. Let the world read of his sons, the Kurus; of Panchali, the fiery oracle of desire and death. No matter what he calls her, it doesn't diminish her in the slightest.'

'And what of you, Govinda?' Suka had asked, with genuine concern.

'I, too, shall remain what your father makes of me – a veritable troublemaker; partly unreal, completely cunning, and undeniably dead – at least to the world. As for the rest, I'll leave it to future generations to think of me what they will…'

'And you have that much faith in humanity, Govinda? You trust them that much?'

Govinda had chuckled. 'Do you believe in the Divine, Suka?'

'Yes. Of course!'

‘I don’t. I don’t believe as a matter of faith. I know, as a matter of fact. It is that divinity I trust…’

‘Then reveal yourself!’ Suka had urged. ‘The world thinks you’re dead, and mourns you. King Dhritarastra and his companions are dead; Dharma has abdicated his throne and has retired to the wild with his brothers… Indraprastha wavers. Already the kingdoms of the east speak of seceding from the empire. How many more reasons do you need? We are leaderless and lost! We need you!’

With a melancholy smile, Govinda had refused. ‘This is the age of Kali, Suka, the age of Time, of inevitability. It is not kingdoms that secede, but janapadas – realms of and for the people, where each human being is his or her own sovereign. The empire as you know it falls, but Aryavarta rises. Kings cannot trample on us anymore in the name of Divine Order. I had to die, so that people would believe that the Firewright Order had died with me. I had to fall, so that on my bones a new hero would rise. It won’t do for statues of stone to become living men once again. The people must find themselves; they must find the kings and gods within… Vasudeva Narayana must go back to sleep on the Eternal Ocean till he is woken at the end of Kali, the new age.’

‘But…’ Suka had protested, clearly disappointed.

Laughing, Govinda had squeezed the scholar’s shoulder in reassurance. ‘Don’t worry, my friend. Some things don’t change, whether legend or fact. Narayana will not forsake his Sri…’

‘You mean…?’

‘Yes. And that final secret of mine I shall leave in your keeping,’ Govinda had finished, with a wink.

Before the dumbfounded scholar could say anything more, Govinda was gone.

Suka never saw him again. Decades had passed since: Suka had been an old man then and was now older still. But this much he was sure of, that when his name had faded into the mists of time Govinda would still be remembered.

Taking a deep breath, Suka turned to the waiting assembly. His voice cracked with emotion as he said, ‘My father often said that no story in the world existed that had not been told in this composition. But if there is one thing that I have learnt, as a witness to this tale, it is that the truth is what we make of it. Every time a story is told, it changes. That does not matter. Humanity endures. It is not ours to do more than what Time has brought to us, or less…’

The words filled each man and woman present with both doubt and hope, as though even when the promise of infallibility broke, something still remained to save them all. Confident, the Vyasa went on, ‘Like the self-perfecting Universe, the truth in these stories has a way of surviving, of serving its purpose. Perhaps generations after us will worship the men and women of these tales as heroes, as larger than life. Or, perhaps, someone may ask what is hidden behind the unbelievable. In its own way it lives on. What one calls companion, another calls wife; what one names as love, another identifies as devotion. My father, Dwaipayana, called this his greatest work. It was an account of his kith and kin, of Aryavarta. But what is it really about? Two feuding Orders that don’t exist in the same way anymore? Brothers warring for the throne? Is it a tale of deceit, of righteousness, or of revolution? Who are we to judge what the truth really was…?’ Suka shook his head. ‘Record everything…’ he ordered, his tone firm.

The scholars set up an excited chatter as they formed their groups and began to create and compile the chronicle of Aryavarta.

Suka sat back and watched the proceedings with mixed feelings. He felt pride, yes; but also wistfulness, an inexplicable sadness. Not once had he thought, all those years ago when the young cowherd prince of Mathura had sought him out, that he would truly see this day. Not when Ghora Angirasa had died in his arms nor when Krishna Dwaipayana, his father, had installed him as the Vyasa had he believed that things could be so. But they were.

At that instant, the image of a boy, hardly a young man, dark-skinned and handsome, flickered across his mind. Suka could almost feel the cool tickle of dew-stained grass under the boy’s feet, the wind that mussed his

curly hair, and he heard the melody of the flute at the cowherd's lips. It was a happy tune, but played with such emotion that it wrenched at the Vyasa's heart.

Govinda! Suka whispered in the caverns of his mind, unable to stop himself. The young cowherd stopped playing and looked at the old scholar, a twinkle in his eyes. Suka felt unbelievably jubilant.

His old, wise head bowed with humility, his heart brimming with love and hope for humanity, a satisfied smile danced on the wrinkled face of Sukadeva Vasishta Varuni – Vyasa of the Firstborn and the last Secret Keeper of the Firewrights.

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

A NOTE ON SOURCES AND METHODS

The Aryavarta Chronicles is the product of research and analysis, with the latter drawing on the former. A slew of work is out there – critical, unconventional, even controversial – that revolves around the world of the Mahabharata. Many are in regional and vernacular tongues, existing as folklore and tales that have never made it into print as a cohesive tome. The *Chronicles* rely on a mix of these scholarly and popular sources, on histories that tend towards established fact, as well as those based on socially constructed beliefs of what constitutes fact.

THE EVOLUTION OF AN EPIC

The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) version (also known as the Poona Critical Edition) of the Mahabharata, which remains the dominant source for most retellings and reinterpretations today, is estimated to have been prevalent around the fifth century ce, that is, the Gupta Age. That leaves a fair 3,000 odd years or so during which the story was told over and over, endlessly, forming a final ‘layered’ narrative filled with explanations and interpolations. The bard–narrator of the mainstream edition, Ugrashravas Sauti, states that he recites what he heard from the scholar Vaishampayana, who in turn is one of the five students who learns the epic from its original author, the Vyasa. Add to this the fact that the epic

itself recorded its growth from 8,800 verses composed by Dwaipayana Vyasa to 24,000 verses, and then to the 100,000-verse version we have today. Somewhere along the line, the Harivamsa is added on, as an appendix. And there begins a journey – for history is not stagnant, nor is its narration.

UNRAVELLING THE EPIC

Bibliographically speaking, my study began with C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2005). My main source, which forms the broad canvas of 'canon' Mahabharata, is the translated version by K.M. Ganguli (*The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, Volumes 1–12*, Calcutta: P.C. Roy/Oriental Publishing Co., 1884–96; Republished, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970) available online through www.sacred-texts.com. I read this in conjunction with J.A.B. Van Buiten's three-volume translation which goes up to the Udyoga Parvan (*Mahabharata, Volumes 1 to 3*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975–78); P. Lal's lyrical transcreation of the epic (*Mahabharata of Vyasa*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1986); and Ramesh Menon's more contemporary retelling (*The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering, Volumes 1 and 2*, Lincoln: iUniverse, 2006).

I have relied also on Pandit Ramachandrashastri Kinjawadekar's version of the *Harivamsa* (Poona: Chitrashala Press, 1936), as translated by Desiraju Hanumanta Rao, A. Purushothaman and A. Harindranath (http://mahabharata-resources.org/harivamsa), and on M.N. Dutt's version of the text (*The Harivamsa*, Calcutta: Elysium Press, 1897). H.H. Wilson's *Vishnu Purana* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961; original copyright 1840) was invaluable especially when it came to cross-checking genealogies and timelines, as was the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International's version of the Srimad Bhagavatam, available through the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase Network website (www.vedabase.net).

The subsequent analysis, such as it is, was not without method. D.D. Kosambi notes: 'Against the hypothesis of "pure invention", one must ask why the invention took these particular forms …' ('The Autochthonous

Element in the Mahabharata', 1964, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 84–1, pp. 31–44). This has been the dominant principle I have chosen to hold on to, focussing on the *why*.

Two stalwarts have influenced my approach to this issue. First, I have borrowed liberally from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's deductive principles in his *Krishnacharitra* (trans. Alo Shome, New Delhi: Hindology Books, 2008). Chattopadhyay's analysis is based on a categorical rejection of supernatural events, interpolations and 'events that can be proved to be untrue in any other way' (p. 27). A similar perspective is evident in K.M. Munshi's series *Krishnavatara* (Volumes 1–7, Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1990). While Munshi admits to using his creativity freely in filling what may be gaps in the facts, he remains true to the notion that Krishna-Govinda was a man who eventually became a legend. In his view Govinda was not god, but a (near-perfect) man. I have gratefully followed his lead in beginning with the premise that this is the story of human beings, exemplary ones who are well-deserving of their consequent elevation to divine status. But it is not a story of gods.

Alf Hiltebeitel, a leading Mahabharata scholar, is one of those who speaks of a symbolism-rich Mahabharata; that is, the idea that many expressions in the Mahabharata cannot be literally interpreted ('The Mahabharata and Hindu Eschatology', 1972, *History of Religions*, 12–2, pp. 95–135). Hiltebeitel's *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma Kings* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001) also deserves mention for fuelling many ideas; as does James L. Fitzgerald's broad piece covering many topics on the Mahabharata, including the historical evolution of the text itself ('The Great Epic of India as Religious Rhetoric: A Fresh Look at the Mahabharata', 1983, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 51–4, pp. 611–630). Mary Carroll Smith's analysis of the variation in meter, narrative structure, and the subtle moves from Vedic to Classical Sanskrit in the text as we have it today, to identify possible additions and interpolations ('The Mahabharata's Core', 1975, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95–3, pp. 479–482) was central to my reconstruction of the story.

Such a reconstruction also requires political, social and even psychological explanations. For this, I have drawn on ideas from many analytical and creative works, first among them being Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: End of an Epoch* (Hyderabad: Disha Books/Orient Longman, 1991). Karwe is particularly notable for her critical approach to the question of Dharma Yudhisthir's father. Buddhadeva Bose in his *Mahabharater Katha/The Book of Yudhisthir* (trans. Sujit Mukherjee, London: Sangam Books/Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1986) attributes to Dharma Yudhisthir's character the many frustrations and exasperations that I find likely, and though I am less inclined to glorify Dharma as the protagonist of the epic I cannot deny that I benefitted from reading Bose's book.

Alf Hiltebeitel's work on Panchali (*The Cult of Draupadi: Volumes 1 and 2*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988, 1991) and Pradip Bhattacharya's essay on the *Panchkanyas* of lore ('She Who Must Be Obeyed – Draupadi: The Ill-Fated One', 2004, *Manushi*, 144–Sep/Oct, pp. 19–30) provides deeper insights into her compelling character and even the intricacies of her relationships. Panchali is symbolically and overtly equated to Sri – the consort of Vishnu in terms of the pantheon and the symbol of nature at a deeper level. This clearly places her as the heroine of a story which has Govinda as its hero; an idealized symmetry that is alluded to in Prathibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (trans. Pradip Bhattacharya, New Delhi: Rupa, 1995.)

The tale, however, unfolds in a different way. The consequent asymmetry, anomaly even, is explained away in canon Mahabharata and its derivative tales (many of which speak of Panchali's preference for Partha) using the concepts of rebirth and divine manifestation. But, if we do away with such interpolated justifications, what might it mean?

I do not have the answer to this riddle, but only a question. Behind the implied and admitted romances, is there a story of affection so obvious that it is easily overlooked? Is it a kind of Freudian transference, whether in the original itself, or perhaps created post-hoc in the interests of sanitizing and legitimizing the epic but nevertheless hinted at by the triangle of three dark-skinned Krishnas – Panchali, Partha and Govinda? Or is the asymmetry

itself the story – the tale of a world where many such things are not right? To borrow Govinda Shauri's words: 'The world as we know it would not make sense unless Ahalya were turned to stone.'

ALTERNATE MAHABHARATAS

At this point, I shall admit that I was occasionally surprised, perhaps even shocked, at the alternate theories that seemed to suggest themselves, particularly since I had been brought up on strong doses of canon Mahabharata. The ideas, however, were not as 'alternative' as I had first thought – I discovered the existence of alternate versions of the Mahabharata, many of which were equally canonical in their own right. These included the Bhil Mahabharata and the Indonesian Kakawain versions, both of which I highlight for a reason – The Bhil Mahabharata was (in my view) the nearest I could get to a subaltern version of the epic, and took a very different view of the socio-political status quo (for variations and tales from the Bhil Mahabharata see Satya Chaitanya's blog, based on his research of this folklore: http://innertraditions.blogspot.com).

The Indonesian Kakawain version (http://www.joglosemar.co.id/bharatayuda.html) was equally exciting, since it was possibly shipped out of Aryavarta and to Indonesian islands in a form that was closer to the 'core' or original Mahabharata – that is, an epic with fewer interpolations. A list of resources and essays on the Mahabharata variations across Bengali, Bhil, Oriya, Tamil, Malayalam and Rajasthani cultures (to name a few) is available at A. Harindranath's stunning website: (http://mahabharata-resources.org). Essays on the Oriya *Sarala Mahabharata* are available on B.N. Patnaik's site: http://saralamahabharat.blogspot.com.

BUILDING THE WORLD OF THE EPIC

W.G. Archer (*The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry*, New York: MacMillan, 1957) points to the small but immeasurably important link in the Upanishads that has opened the door to a larger story-world that revolves around the group of scholar–sages known as the Angirasas. With

that in mind, the Vedic–Upanishad symbolism in the epic pointed out by Alf Hiltebeitel (‘The Two Krsnas on One Chariot: Upanisadic Imagery and Epic Mythology’, 1984, *History of Religions*, 24–1, pp. 1–26) begins to make sense. Many reinterpretations and interpolations fall into place and can be logically identified, keeping in mind the basic symbolic themes, as well as the body of philosophical knowledge that the epic seeks to encompass. Most importantly, the Mahabharata starts becoming a story of technological evolution and the associated social change.

I turned to the broader Vedic and Upanishadic literature in an attempt to decipher what the astra-incantations might have meant in a secular and scientific sense, and to understand the technology that hid behind metaphors. For this, I have relied strongly on Karen Thomson and Jonathan Slocum’s work on ancient Sanskrit, available from the Linguistics Research Centre at the University of Texas at Austin; particularly their translations of Barend A. van Nooten and Gary B. Holland’s version of the Rig Veda (*Rig Veda: A Metrically Restored Text*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994). Also deserving reference are Subhash C. Kak’s ‘Science in Ancient India’ (In *Ananya: A Portrait of India*, S.R. Sridhar and N.K. Mattoo (eds.), 1997, AIA: New York, pp. 399–420); Aurobindo’s *The Secret of the Veda* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1993) and Shatavadhani R. Ganesh’s audio commentary on the PurushaSuktam and the NarayanaSuktam (K.V. Raman, *Vedic Chanting*, Bangalore: Sagar Music, 1999.)

The Vedic texts have also been of relevance to understanding the socio-political-economic context of the epic itself. For example, M.B. Emeneau and B.A. van Nooten approach the notions of *Niyoga* and polyandry in the Mahabharata from the broader Vedic context (‘The Young Wife and Her Husband’s Brother: Rgveda 10.40.2 and 10.85.44.’, 1991, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 111–3, pp. 481–494). Also deserving mention here is Janet Chawla’s feminist reading of the Rig Veda (‘Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda’, 1994, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29–43, pp. 2817–2827).

LIFE AND WAR IN EPIC TIMES

In terms of setting the descriptive stage for the story, my first stop was Romila Thapar's *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to 1300 AD* (New Delhi: Penguin Books/Allen Lane, 2002). City descriptions are based mainly on details in the epic narrative, but I also referred to marine archaeologist S.R. Rao's *The Lost City of Dvaraka* (Goa: National Institute of Oceanography, 1999); David Frawley's *Gods, Sages and Kings: Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization* (Salt Lake City: Passage Press/Morson Publishing, 1991) and A.S. Gaur, Sundaresh and SilaTripati's 'An Ancient Harbour at Dwarka: Study Based on the Recent Underwater Explorations' (2004, *Current Science*, 86–9, pp. 1256–60) for ideas on the layout of Dwaraka city, particularly its fortifications and defences. Gaur, Sundaresh and Tripati's 'Evidence for Indo–Roman trade from Bet Dwarka Waters, West Coast of India' (2005, *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 35, pp. 117–127) inspired the notion of Dwaraka as a maritime power.

The military history of India, from the AllEmpires.com historical information website, Sushama Londhe's page on war in Ancient India (http://www.hinduwisdom.info/War_in_Ancient_India.htm), S.A. Paramahans's 'A Glance at Military Techniques in Ramayana and Mahabharata' (1989, *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 24–3, 156–160) and The Sarasvati Web (http://www.hindunet.org/hindu_history/sarasvati) also deserve reference.

GENEALOGIES

In constructing genealogies, I have relied on the texts of the Mahabharata and Harivamsa mentioned above, as well as the Srimad Bhagavatham. My tables were supplemented and cross-checked against two sources: Desiraju Hanumanta Rao's genealogical tables of the Yadu and related dynasties (www.mahabharata-resources.org) and the tables in Irawati Karve's *Yuganta*. Vettam Mani's classic *Puranic Encyclopaedia* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1975) has filled many gaps and provided essential details.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF TIME

My approach to Time has been a mix of the literal and the symbolic. Myth suggests that lifespans were much longer in the previous yugas, lasting perhaps up to three or four hundred years in the Dwaparayuga – the era of the Mahabharata. However, these figures take on a different meaning if we apply the notion of ashrama or stages of life. K.N.S. Patnaik (*The Mahabharata Chronology*, Pune: Annual Research J. of the Institute for Rewriting Indian History, 1990) compares how childhood (*baalyam*) lasted forty years in the times of the Mahabharata, whereas it lasts approximately 15 years in the current age of Kali. Similarly, youth or *youvanam* lasted till the age of 120 years in the past, as compared to about 45 years in today's age. We are, in essence, dealing with a different basis of measurement of time and age.

Time, in the *Chronicles*, is therefore scaled down to contextualize the main actors as the middle-aged individuals they were, relative to the period of the epic. As a result, the age of the characters is given in contemporary terms.

Interestingly, ancient units of measurements ran by seasonal and sidereal time, along with the common solar. The possibility, therefore, of a year as we know constituting a shorter period of time, cannot be discounted. Subash Kak ('On the Chronological Framework for Indian Culture', *Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 2000, pp. 1–24) mentions how one of the bases for variation in the dating of the events of the Mahabharata may be the calendar system used (more precisely, the number of stellar constellations in a given cycle).

LANGUAGE

My work would have been near-impossible but for these amazing dictionaries and glossaries, accessed primarily through the Cologne Digital Sanskrit Dictionaries website (http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de). Included in this database are the well-known Monier-Williams, Apte and MacDonnell dictionaries, as well as Kale's work on Sanskrit grammar. I also used the simpler but wonderful Spoken Sanskrit Dictionary

(http://spokensanskrit.de) and relied on the Sanskrit Heritage Site (http://sanskrit.inria.fr/sanskrit.html) for grammar reference.

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In loving memory of Appa, A.R. Udayasankar.

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Krishna lives in Singapore with her family, which includes her bookloving fur-kids, Boozo and Zana.

The Aryavarta Chronicles
Book 3
Kurukshetra

Nothing left to fight for is nothing left to lose...

Emperor Dharma Yudhisthir of the Kauravas and Empress Panchali Draupadi rule over a unified Aryavarta, an empire built for them by Govinda Shauri with the blessings of the Firstborn and by the might of those whom everyone believes long gone – the Firewrights.

Now the Firewrights rise from the ashes of the past, divided as before in purpose and allegiance, and no one, it seems, can stand in the way of the chaos about to be unleashed on the land – not the Firstborn, not the kings of Aryavarta, and not Govinda Shauri.

As sinister plans are put in play and treacherous alliances emerge, Aryavarta transforms into its own worst enemy. Dharma Yudhisthir gambles away his empire, the tormented empress is forced into a terrifying exile and the many nations of the realm begin to take up arms in a bid to fight, conquer and destroy each other.

His every dream shattered, Govinda is left a broken man. The only way he can protect Aryavarta and the woman in whose trusted hands he had left it is by playing a dangerous game. But can he bring himself to reveal the terrible secrets that the Vyasa has protected all his life – secrets that may well destroy the Firstborn, and the Firewrights with them?

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